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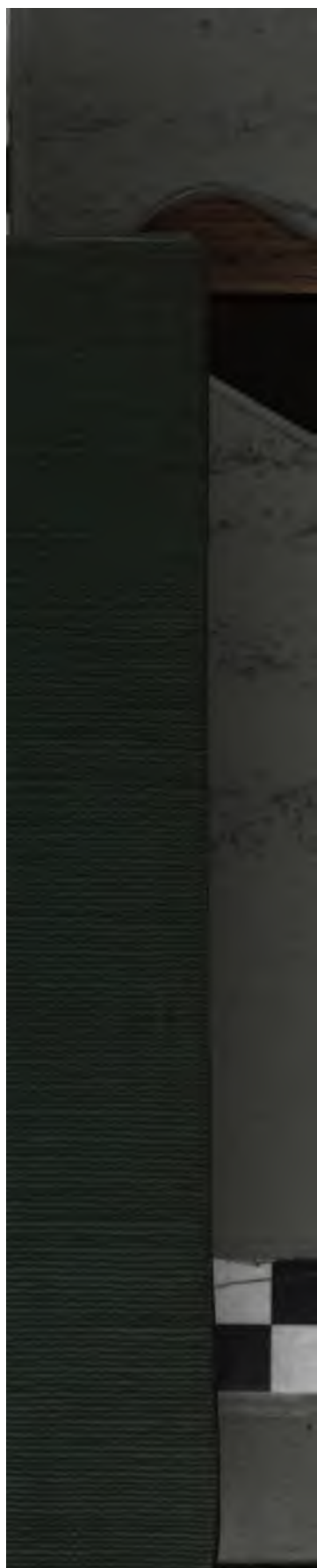
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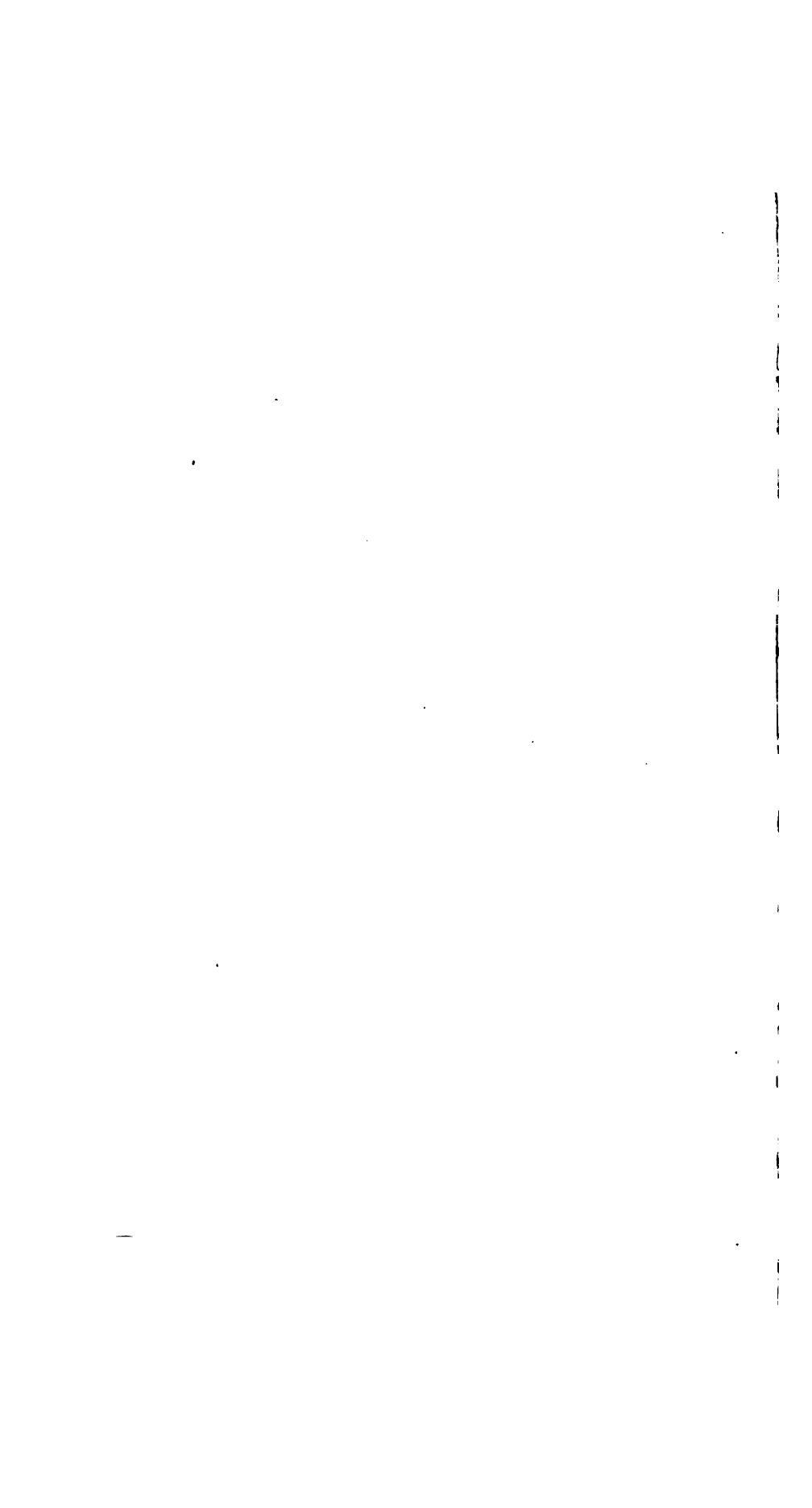


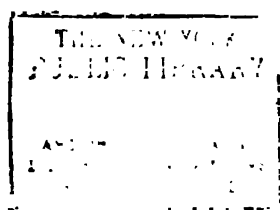


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A PRINCE OF LOVERS







“It is indeed farewell, dear Princess? I am to go?”

FRONTINPIERRE.

A Prince of Lovers

A Romance

by

WILLIAM MAGNAN LARK.

Author of "The Romance of the Middle Ages,"
"The Romance of the Renaissance," etc.

Illustrated by J. H. P. H. H. H. H. H.

Boston

Little, Brown and Company

1905



A Prince of Lovers

A Romance

By

SIR WILLIAM MAGNAY BART

Author of "THE RED CHANCELLOR," "THE MAN-TRAP,"
"THE HEIRESS OF THE SEASON," Etc., Etc.

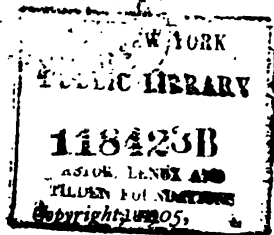
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1905

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A Prince of Lovers

CHAPTER I

THE DUKE AND HIS MASTER

FOR the greater part of two centuries after the close of the Thirty Years War there existed in Germany some two hundred independent states. It is with two of these, lying in the midst of what was once the Hercynian forest, which tract even then, although in slow process of clearing, retained much of its primitive, desolate wildness, that the events of the following story are concerned.

And it may be well to premise, seeing that nowadays in story-telling the realms of imagination have often a two-fold meaning, literal as well as metaphorical, that, though the embroidery of this tale may be fanciful, the ground upon which it is worked is of the substance called fact. For the once secret chronicles of these two hundred kingdoms, principalities, palatinates, bishoprics, duchies, landgravates and what not form very pretty reading to the student of humanity; and the dull atmosphere of much pettiness and fatuous pomp is lighted up in welcome fashion by occasional stars of romance. And, after all, apart from the favourable soil they find in that traditional land of the romantic, these flowers which continually spring up amid the dull herbage are easily ac-

counted for. For what is romance but the opposite of the humdrum? And is not human nature the same all the world over, flourishing even when found in the stifling confinement of a formal and etiquette-bound court? And does not young and healthy humanity rebel against the humdrum, and fight tooth and nail against its own repression?

Thus it came about that the somewhat dramatic romance of the following pages was played upon a fitting stage, with a change of scenes, the royal palace, and the castle in the wood, homes respectively of the heroine and the villain of the piece. The actors have been dead and forgotten for more than a century, although they live in their types to-day, the style of their playing alone being changed. The weak sovereign, the ambitious, astute, unscrupulous minister, the brave, chivalrous hero, the heroine for whom pride and love and policy are desperately fighting—at least we all know her—the cold, imperious beauty with the burning heart. And the unprincipled man-of-the-world, self-indulgent and scheming to his own gratification, at least he is not extinct, nor is the weakly ambitious plotter who would grasp the fruit but fears to climb the tree, and the evil councillor who for the benefit of his own desperate fortunes eggs him up.

With quieter methods they are in our midst to-day. They are walking through their parts with just as much determination of spirit as was theirs who fought and strutted and fretted and postured in the days before life was so carefully toned down—in the days of this story. And that the story is in the main true the annals above mentioned can vouch, even if the events may not in the reality have welded themselves together just as here set down with a mind for the reader's patience as well as his hoped-for entertainment.

In his private cabinet Duke Theodor of Waldavia was going through his daily consultation with his Chancellor,

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Baron Rollmar; a prescribed custom as irksome to both as it was unnecessary to either.

"Your excellency has reckoned without your host," said the Duke.

"I do not propose, Highness," replied the Chancellor, grimly confident, "that my host shall have the making up of the reckoning at all."

"He may not submit to dictation," suggested his highness.

"Then he will be a greater fool than I take him for, seeing that this project is as much for his benefit as ours."

"Some men," the Duke hazarded out of his somewhat limited experience, "would not take kindly to a forced marriage."

"Your Highness uses a harsh word," Rollmar observed indifferently.

"Perhaps. I was thinking of my daughter."

The Chancellor just checked a shrug. "Dukes' daughters and beggars cannot be choosers. But we have yet to learn that Princess Ruperta has occasion to bewail her particular lot."

"She is in an abominably false position. Prince Ludwig's silence and indifference would be galling enough to any woman's pride. And Ruperta has, perhaps, more than her share."

The old minister gave a slight bow of assent. Crowned monarchs are not to be contradicted gratuitously, even when they indulge in self-disparagement.

"The position is becoming intolerable," his highness continued.

"Any hour may end it," said Rollmar, quietly. Then he added, "Surely you approve of the alliance, sire?"

"Naturally." Duke Theodor emphasised the word with a nod which was intended to express the dignity which in his conferences with his Chancellor was always provokingly elusive. "Of course it would be of untold

advantage to both crowns. It is a most natural desire. The uniting of the two kingdoms would more than double their power and influence."

"It should increase them ten-fold," said Rollmar, as repeating a cut-and-dried argument for his policy. "And not only their power but their wealth; the development, more especially, of the natural wealth of the one by union with the labour of the other."

"Yes, yes," snapped the Duke, impatiently, almost petulantly. "That is our view. Our immediate concern, however, is that of Ruperta and Prince Ludwig."

Rollmar smiled, and his smile seemed hardly to endorse the word concern.

"Except to themselves, is it very material?" he asked significantly.

The Duke tried to look resolute. "I have my daughter's happiness to think of, Baron," he protested.

"Doubtless. So have I," he returned imperturbably. "And am taking the measures to secure it."

"Yes, yes, I know," the Duke admitted pettishly. "But this state of affairs will not do so. We shall be a laughing-stock."

"Let him laugh who wins."

"Ludwig's conduct in ignoring the matter is an insult."

"We will not think so, much less say so."

"But others will."

"Others are not going to marry him."

"Are we?"

"Certainly; without fail; most assuredly."

The Duke rose and paced the room.

"But how long is this state of things going to last, Baron? You must remember that Ruperta is not one to take kindly to the part of a puppet. She is a girl of spirit, and this wretched fellow Ludwig, by his cavalier treatment, is rousing it in a way that threatens difficulties

to our project. Can nothing be done? Where is the fellow?"

"Nobody knows. If anybody did it would be I."

"I feel inclined," said Theodor, working himself into a weak man's passion, "to throw over the whole affair. It would be the most dignified course."

"And the most foolish."

The Duke turned sharply at the blunt rejoinder. "Certainly not more foolish than we are showing ourselves at present."

Rollmar gave a great audible sigh as he often did when his master was particularly tiresome.

"Pardon me, sire. A thousand times worse, although I do not seem able to convince you of the fact. I may be so unfortunate as to differ in ideas from your Highness, but my notion of foolishness would be to abandon a magnificent chance of imperial aggrandisement for the sake of taking umbrage at a boy's want of manners. Ludwig is a fool; he may not know it, but we do, and when he sets his eyes for the first time on Princess Ruperta he will know it too. The mischief is that they have taken it into their heads to dislike each other before they have ever met. But I anticipate little difficulty on that account."

"Perhaps not," replied the Duke, who rejoiced in his rare opportunities of twitting his masterful minister with failure. "But you must first find your runaway bridegroom."

"I intend to find him," Rollmar returned quietly.

"When found you may perhaps discover a wife as well," suggested Theodor, making the most of his temporary advantage.

The Chancellor smiled grimly, and there was an ugly gleam in his dark, fierce eyes. "It would be a pity—more particularly for her," he rejoined. "But as his bride would certainly not be of his own rank the position would present little difficulty."

The Duke understood his words the more clearly as read by the pitiless light in his eyes. The talk was taking a turn which he always made a point of avoiding. If he was virtually governed by his astute old servant and left him practically a free hand he would at least take no responsibility for or cognisance of his ruthlessly unscrupulous methods.

"At least we may take care that my daughter forms no undesirable attachment," he said somewhat feebly to give a turn to the subject.

"You may leave me to deal with such a contingency," Rollmar said, drawing back his lips in a significant smile.

"Ludwig's unheard-of conduct is enough to make a girl of spirit rebel."

"She may rebel," Rollmar retorted, beginning to grow impatient. "We are prepared for rebellion. I think your Highness' hint can be referred to no actual cause?"

"No," said the Duke, weakly. "I know of no attachment. I only fear it."

"You need not fear it, sire," replied Rollmar, with infinite meaning in his smile. "The favoured lover's life would be a very short one."

CHAPTER II

AT THE FORTUNE-TELLER'S

THE moon-lit gables of the city threw a zig-zag pattern on the cobble-paved streets, and brought alternately into view and obscurity the few passers-by, among whom were two women, who, hurrying along, seemed, by keeping as near as possible to the base of the triangular shadows, to shun observation. Recognition, indeed, would not have been easy, for the ample hoods of their grey cloaks were drawn well over their faces; only their figures and lightness of step told that they were young. As to their looks there was, for the reason already given, no room for more than speculation. Close as they kept together but few words passed between them, and those scarcely above a whisper. Of the people whom they met a good many turned to look after them in curiosity, but owing no doubt to their air of purposeful hurry, no man seemed to think it worth while to follow them. Up to a certain point, that is.

Arrived at the fork where one street ran into two the women paused as if uncertain which to take. It was necessary to look up and read the names, and as they did so a man crossing the street caught a momentary glimpse of one of the up-turned faces silhouetted against an oil lamp, which, from its place some yards away, was brought into level with the girl's head. He stopped, almost with a start, then crossing quickly to the shadow of an entry,

waited till the girls resumed their way, upon which he came out and followed them.

They went, however, but a couple of hundred yards farther. Before a house in a small secluded *Platz* they stopped and stood hesitating. On the door was a plate where by the light of a bluish lamp which hung in the portico could be read the one word, "Parabosco." The courage of the two girls, if checked, soon returned; they went boldly to the door, which at their approach opened silently and admitted them. The man who had followed them now paced up and down the *Platz* in thoughtful indecision.

He was a good-looking young fellow, alert and soldier-like; yet in the strong moonlight the face seemed much more than that of a mere city lounge; its beauty was intellectual, its distinction manifestly came from a sense of power, power in action united with gentleness of manner. That was the man's attraction, his easily imagined fascination, that sense of quiet, unobtrusive strength; the charm lay not in his mere features but in the spirit behind them.

Presently, as though his resolve was taken, he went up to the blue-lit door. An unseen hand opened it as before and, without a word, he passed in. Meanwhile the two girls had entered a room hung with dark velvet on which were worked strange cabalistic devices. The air was subtly perfumed and a light shining through a globe of blue crystal just illuminated the room enough to enhance its character of mystery. Perhaps the most striking feature of this was the dead silence, a stillness that seemed to strike the visitors dumb with its almost appalling intensity.

"I wish we had not come." Fear forced out the whisper from one of the girls.

"We cannot help it now," returned her companion, whose voice, scarcely above her breath, seemed only just to repress a tremor.

"I had no idea it was a place like this," the other said, looking round with almost a shudder. "If they—he—the man should find out——"

"He will, easily, if you chatter."

"Well," persisted the irrepressible one, "this is not what I bargained for. I thought it would be a piece of fun, but I don't—oh!"

Her talk was cut short by a woman in oriental dress who had suddenly appeared and, holding the curtains aside, was motioning the visitors to pass through. With a momentary hesitation they followed her gesture, and as they crossed a small ante-room a door in front of them swung open and they found themselves in the presence of the fortune-teller to whom their curiosity had attracted them. The sanctum of this modern soothsayer was furnished with the usual stock-in-trade of his profession, objects calculated to inspire awe—or something worse—in the vulgar, and to throw a glamour of the supernatural over what, stripped of the mystic surroundings, might have been a common-place personality. The flamboyant chart of the heavens, the divining crystal, a skull, the glowing brazier, all were there, and at a table by a great parchment volume sat the fortune-teller. A sharp-eyed man with clean-shaven, cunning face in which a certain suggestion of intellectuality was spoilt by the expression resulting from the habitual practice of roguery.

The light was so arranged that it fell on the visitors, leaving the fortune-teller in comparative obscurity, like a great spider in the corner of his web.

"Ladies," he said in his professional phrase, with a well practised trick of voice, unnatural and therefore calculated to add to the air of the supernatural, "you have come, I presume, to consult the stars and the oracles of the unseen world whose humble interpreter I am. It is well; the time is propitious, the hour is golden."

Doubtless the emphasis he laid upon the last word was intended as a hint, for with that he pushed toward

his clients a silver shell in which lay several coins. Each of the girls added a piece of gold, at which the eyes gleaming out of the semi-darkness seemed to give a flash of satisfaction. With that the soothsayer made a show of the tricks of his trade. He described figures with his wand; cast chemicals into the brazier, causing ghastly flames to leap and spirt; he took, perfunctorily indeed, an observation of the heavens and affected an invocative rapture. All this, however, did not last long, possibly because the performer may have received an intimation that another visitor was waiting to consult him. But the farce was gone through with a gravity which did credit to the restraint behind that very mundane face.

"Now will one of you ladies advance and place the lines of your hand under observation?" he said in a tone of commanding request.

Still keeping her hood well over her face, one of the girls went forward to the table and extended her hand, a long aristocratic hand of exquisite shape, a hand that even to a man less shrewd than the fortune-teller must have revealed the station of its owner. Whether indeed he had suspected or not the character of his visitors, the man glanced up from the hand with a sharp look of inquiry at the half-concealed face. The scrutiny was but momentary, next instant he was bending with a magnifying glass over the outstretched palm. The time-honoured jargon of the fortune-teller was repeated; then the cards told the same tale with alluring variations, the stars gave a confirmatory horoscope.

"Jupiter in conjunction with Venus points to a great, we might almost venture to say a royal marriage," the seer pronounced with professional glibness.

"No, no, not that!" the girl exclaimed with a vehemence which startled the professor. "At least, I mean it is not certain, is it? It can be prevented, it can be fought against?"

The smile on the man's face did not hide the look of intense curiosity with which he regarded her.

"Fight against the stars?" he protested with a deprecating laugh. "You are a bold young lady to imagine that."

"Against the stars? No," she returned impetuously. "But against the powers here below that would coerce fate."

"The fate I have predicted," rejoined the fortune-teller dryly, "is scarcely one which a woman would fight against."

"That may be," the girl retorted, "but perhaps, Herr Professor, if your skill in divination were as great as is pretended you would hardly be surprised at my distaste for the fate you have predicted."

The sharp eyes with their keen iridescence were fastened on her now in triumphant premeditation.

"My skill scarcely deserves your sneer, madame," he replied with a repressing of his thoughts. "It may be greater than you imagine or than I claim. Dare you challenge me to put it to the proof? Will you—it is no light test—will you look into the magic mirror?"

"Why should I?" the girl asked half contemptuously.

"Merely that your scepticism may see how far it is warranted. The mirror may confirm my verbal forecast," he gave a shrug, "or not. Only I warn you that what you shall see there may not be agreeable."

The other girl who had so far sat intently silent rose and caught her companion's arm. "No," she urged in a frightened whisper, "do not look, I beg you. It may be terrible."

"Worse than the royal marriage?" the other exclaimed with a scornful laugh. "I cannot stop half-way now. I have heard my fate, I must see its confirmation."

"As you will," said the fortune-teller quietly. "Only do not blame me should the result be displeasing."

"Show me, Herr Professor."

He rose. "For that," he said, "you must be here alone. Your friend may wait in the ante-chamber."

"You hear, Minna?"

"No, no; it is not right. I will not leave you. Surely you have heard enough."

"No; I mean to see what this mirror has to show. What," laughing, "did we come for but to know the future?"

The dark eyes out of the shadow were watching the two girls furtively, but their owner spoke no word of persuasion. Doubtless his knowledge of human nature told him that curiosity would prevail unaided. And so it was. The companion was forced reluctantly to leave them, and when the two were alone the fortune-teller quietly slipped round and, under pretence of seeing that the door was securely shut, slipped home its bolt.

"Remove your hood," he said facing the girl.

"It is unnecessary," she replied. "I came to see, not to be seen."

"Precisely," the professor returned with a sarcastic grin. "And you thought to trifle with our sublime art. You judge so meanly of it as to fancy that we whose knowledge passes human comprehension are ignorant of the very identity of those who consult us. You pay us a poor compliment, Princess."

For a few moments there was silence as she stood, half-fascinated, watching his glittering eyes. The light was on his face now bringing out its Jewish cast, the lines of greed and cunning. If the face disquieted her, she did not show it, she was too proud, too completely mistress of herself for that. Simply, with a slight inclination of the head she accepted his protest, giving no sign of discomfiture at the word which proclaimed her identity, merely saying, as though she were speaking to a servant—

"Will you let me see what the mirror has to show?"

He was thinking, designing actively as he watched

her. "Surely, Princess," he said, with an affectation of humility, "the resources of my art are at your gracious disposal. Will you be seated till the moment of revelation arrives?"

He turned and busied himself with certain preparations. Presently with a gesture of warning he drew aside a dark curtain and disclosed a deep-set mirror, the surface showing nothing but a dead black reflection. Immediately it was disclosed, a vapour spread over and blurred the glass.

The Princess had risen and taken a step towards the mirror. Parabosco turned sharply as the vapour rose; there was evil intent in his face.

"Princess," he said significantly, "you are not as ordinary inquirers are. The destinies of royal personages float in a higher plane, are woven in a grander frame than those of ordinary mortals. The rewards of divination must be proportionate."

The man's meaning was as obvious as his looks were evil. After a moment's hesitation she took out her purse and laid another gold piece upon the table. The man's eyes remained fixed in their greed.

"That is no price," he said bluntly, "for the revelation of a royal destiny."

"The rewards of divination, as you call them," the Princess replied with quiet scorn, "seem to be governed not so much by proportion as by extortion. Here, I will give you no more."

As she spoke she laid a second gold coin beside the other. Parabosco took them up and turned to the mirror, still obscured by the rising vapour. Without looking back, he beckoned her to his side and enjoining silence by a gesture, pointed to the recess. Gradually the vapour became less dense till at length it was so attenuated that the black reflection could once more be seen. The professor recited a rigmarole in the style of an incantation—once more the vapour swept across the glass and as it

rolled away a picture became faintly visible. Standing erect, Parabosco signed to his companion to look closely into the mirror. As she bent forward to see through the tantalising mist, the dim picture grew clearer till she could make out its subject.

The interior of a church, a priest at the altar, before him a bride and bridegroom, the man in a splendid uniform. But the whole indistinct, and remaining only a few seconds before it was obscured by a fresh cloud of vapour.

"You saw?" Parabosco asked.

"Very little. The faces were hidden."

"Was that less than you—bargained for, Princess?" he returned sarcastically. "The lady was yourself."

"How do I know that?"

"The mirror shows the fate of none but the gazer."

"Is that all?"

"By no means. It was hardly worth while to be shown that, except that it has confirmed what I have already predicted. Look," he exclaimed, pointing with a swift gesture to the mirror, "the vapour is agitated! There is fate behind it; the great crisis, the real story, doubtless, of your life. Dare you read it?"

"Indeed I dare," she answered half-mockingly, as though she had begun to see through the charlatan's trick. "Do not delay; I have no time to waste."

Her words were unfortunate, suggesting to him that for the time she was in his power. "You must give me a larger fee, Princess," he demanded sharply. "Look! Quickly, before the charm dissolves."

"I will give you nothing more," she replied firmly.

"Then I will close the mirror, and the chance will be gone forever. See! Even now it may be too late," he cried in a pretended excitement. "It is to see your fate for good or ill. Give me your purse. Quick! Your jewels, it is worth all that and more!"

She had drawn back and stood facing him steadily.

"I will give you nothing more, I tell you," she said resolutely. "Your conjuring tricks have been already overpaid."

"Tricks?" he screamed. "You dare to blaspheme our sublime art and mysteries. You know not the risk you run, how near the brink of deadly horror you stand. You shall see your destiny. The fates are not to be invoked lightly. You came here to know the future, you shall know it and shall pay for the knowledge."

The design of intimidation and extortion was manifest now in all its vulgar brutality, but the quack had in his victim, although a woman, yet a woman of character and spirit.

"Not one kreutzer more," she maintained. "I have had enough of this nonsense and your rudeness. Show me the way out of this place."

"Not till you have satisfied my just demands," he returned with an ugly look of menace. "The revelation has been invoked for you and you shall pay for it whether you look or not."

She took a step towards the door. He sprang forward and intercepted her.

"Not so, Princess. You go not till you give what I demand."

Mortified as she was at having put herself in the man's power and at risking the discovery of her identity which was sure to excite his greed, she yet never lost her presence of mind.

"You will let me go at once, fellow," she said haughtily, "or it will be the worse for you."

But he judged shrewdly that it might be the worse for him in any event. "You will pay me to the utmost of your power or it will be the worse for you," he retorted. "I am sorry to have to speak to you bluntly, Princess, but necessity cannot dance attendance on fine speeches or miss golden opportunities, eh?"

For a moment she deliberated on the simplest way out

of a false position, false enough and to most women terrifying, although her high spirit ignored its danger. Distasteful as it was to make terms with the ruffian, it yet seemed the most sensible way out. A scandal would to her proud spirit be hateful, and then there was Chancellor Rollmar to think of.

"I am content to pay for my folly in coming to this den of jugglery," she said composedly. "I will give you two gold ducats beyond what you have already extorted."

"I must have more than that," he demanded threateningly. "What? Five ducats all told? It is absurd. Princesses do not come to me every day."

As he spoke he made a grab at her purse and thrust it into the folds of his gown. "Now, your jewels, my Princess; they are trifles to you but much to me. Come! Don't force my need to extremity. Pay your ransom, and then you shall go."

Her hood was thrown back now, disclosing the proud beauty of her face in its defiant indignation. The lips were set in unutterable contempt and loathing. It was the first great indignity she had ever suffered, but if the situation brought its inevitable fear, that was repressed behind the steady, scornful eyes. Parabosco could not meet the look, could not raise his greedy eyes beyond the diamond at her breast.

"You shall pay for this, you ruffian," she said between her teeth.

"I care not," he flung back, "so that you pay first. Hand over your jewels, or must I take them?"

In her determination she glanced round as though for a weapon of defence, but none was available. Interpreting her look, the man sprang forward and clutched her wrist, at the same time endeavoring to force the rings from her fingers. It was the fellow's brutal touch that now for the first time beat down her courage and extorted a cry for help.

"Minna!" she called desperately. "Minna! Come! Quickly!"

"It is useless to call," the fellow protested as he struggled to open her clenched hand. "Your friend cannot hear you. You had best be quiet. So!"

Failing to force back her fingers he had seized her brooch and torn it from her bodice.

"Minna! Help!" she cried, putting her strength against her assailant's in a fierce effort to regain the jewel.

The handle of the door was tried and rattled.

"Your friend cannot come to you," the professor laughed. "Better be reasonable, and——"

With a great thud and snap the door was sent flying open and a man appeared in the opening; the young man who had followed the Princess to the house, and who now took in the scene with a frown under which Professor Parabosco manifestly quailed.

"What does this mean, ruffian?" he demanded. But the fortune-teller was silent. The young man turned to the Princess with a bow.

"May I ask you, madame?"

Save for the flush on her face, she seemed to have regained her habitual composure. "This man, this charlatan whom I foolishly came to consult, has robbed me," she answered.

"Robbed you?" As he turned to the quacksalver his face, which had softened, resumed its stern expression. Behind him were now two anxious spectators of the scene, the princess's companion, Minna, and the woman, his wife, perhaps, who acted as usher to the fortune-teller.

"Not robbed," the fellow cried in defiant reply to the look. "The lady has availed herself of the most transcendent mysteries of our art, and refuses adequate recompense."

He had dropped into the jargon of his calling, and his tone fell from bluster to complaint.

"You take a somewhat unmannerly way of enforcing your demands," the other observed sarcastically. "I will take a leaf out of your book. Restore at once to this lady what you have taken from her."

The professor gave a grin of cunning defiance.

"If I tell you who this lady is," he returned, with a malignant look at the princess, who had meanwhile drawn over her face the hood and cloak which the struggle had thrown off, "you may think, my good sir, that I am not unreasonably paid."

The veiled threat was significant, but before any possible effect could be apparent the young officer quietly took the wind out of the other's sails.

"I am as well aware of this lady's identity as you can be, Master Quacksalver," he said. "Now, as her highness cannot wish to stay here longer, you will at once restore what you have taken."

Parabosco hesitated. The diamond ornament was worth many a week's income to him, and his game in that city was up. Quietly, but with intensely significant action, the young man drew his sword. The jewel was not to be kept; Parabosco sullenly tossed it on the table.

The other man took it up in surprise. "That?" he exclaimed. "You filched that, you scoundrel, to pay for your hocus-pocus! Princess, your brooch." He placed it in her hand with a bow almost of homage.

"I thank you, sir," she said simply, so coolly that under the circumstances the words sounded almost ungracious.

"That is not all, perhaps?"

"He took my purse."

He held out his hand. "The purse!"

"It was my fee."

"The purse!"

It fell with a sharp ring on the table and was presented to its owner as the brooch had been.

"I am indeed grateful, sir," she said, this time with more animation, as though sensible of seeming ungracious. "This man had been already well paid for his trickery. I had given him five gold ducats."

"Under compulsion, Princess, I fear?"

"Perhaps. But I am satisfied."

"Then he must return at least four."

"No, let him keep them; I must pay for my foolish escapade."

"As you will, Princess. But——"

"Will you add to your service by escorting me out of this place?"

"I am honoured, Princess." He stepped aside, and she moved towards the door. "May I say a word to this fellow, Highness?" he begged.

"Is it necessary?"

"Only to warn him that if he sees daylight in this place to-morrow, it will be through the bars of the town prison."

The professor evidently thought it very probable; anyhow he did not dispute the contingency, and in a few moments his three visitors were outside in the street.

"Oh, Princess, what a horrible adventure," cried the impressionable Minna.

"What an amazing piece of folly," her mistress corrected with a little shudder of self-reproach. "One can scarcely blame the wretched man for trying to take advantage of it." She turned to the young man. "Let me thank you again, sir, for having rescued us from an awkward predicament. It was a foolish whim that led us into it, but we had heard a wonderful account of the fortune-teller, and one gets tired of being always sensible."

The explanation seemed wrung from her. The constraint of her tone from which a touch of haughtiness was not absent, showed that the speaker was not used to apologize or account for her actions. But here the

intolerable humiliation of a false position made it imperative.

"A very natural curiosity, Princess," he replied with a smile. "And the accident of the fellow's rudeness was hardly to have been foreseen. It is very hard," he continued with what seemed perhaps a strange temerity, "that those in exalted positions should be debarred from most of the fun and adventures of life." Seeming to recollect himself, he added with a deferential bow, "I am truly favoured at having been permitted to free your Highness from an embarrassing situation."

She had moved away, but now, as by an afterthought, turned back. "I may ask who has rendered me this service?"

"I am honoured, Princess. My name is Lieutenant Ludovic von Bertheim."

"You live in this city?"

"No; I am at present a wanderer. My home is in Beroldstein."

"Ah, in Beroldstein." The name seemed to awaken thoughts which were hardly pleasant, but she dismissed them with a little inward careless laugh. "Well, good night, Herr Lieutenant, and many thanks. I hope there is no need to ask you not to speak of this affair."

Her manner was a curious mixture of coldness and a sense of duty which told her that she owed her defender some graciousness.

"There is no need, Princess," he answered gravely. "You may trust my honour."

For the first time there was manifest interest in the look which read his face. "I am sure of it. Again, good-night," she said.

But he took a step after her. "Your Highness will not refuse my escort to the Palace. It is late and——"

She cut him short. "You are good, but an escort is unnecessary. It is not far, we are two, and we know our way."

With innate good sense he divined an obvious objection to his proposal. "I may at least follow at a distance till I see that your Highness is safe," he urged.

"As you please," she replied coldly. "Come, Minna," and the two hurried off.

Von Bertheim followed at a distance near enough for protection, too distant for remark or scandal. Nothing more than a few curious glances was encountered, and presently the Lieutenant saw them arrive in safety at one of the private doors of the palace. At the distance, some fifty paces, which he had punctiliously kept, he stopped and watched, hoping perhaps for a parting sign from the Princess; but she went in quickly without turning her head in his direction. Her companion, however, looked back and the watcher thought she made a sign to him. As she lingered he hurried forward.

"Good-night," she said with a demureness which was obviously not quite natural. "The Princess thanks you again. And, oh," she added with a burst of more characteristic eagerness, "you will not breathe a word of this folly, will you, Herr Lieutenant! It would be terrible for us all. The Princess trusts to your honour."

Although it was more likely that the exhortation was rather prompted by her own fears than a message from her mistress, von Bertheim replied gravely, "I am sorry that the Princess should deem it necessary to mention it not twice but once even."

"Oh," she protested hastily, "it is my fault. Her Highness has every confidence in your chivalry. It was lucky," she laughed with an admiring glance. "Good-night."

The door closed upon her and he turned away. "Lucky?" he repeated. "Yes. How will the luck turn out? Ah, yes, it was a fortunate chance even if the luck stop there."

CHAPTER III

A SOLDIER OF FORTUNE

LUDOVIC VON BERTHEIM walked back now through the nearly deserted streets towards the heart of the city. Small wonder was it that his manner was preoccupied, his face set in characteristic thought. The last hour had brought him an adventure such as might befall the lot of few men, even in days when manners were freer, life less circumscribed, and adventures more plentiful. Judged from his expression, the train of his thought led to very complex considerations, there was doubt, there was pleasure, anger, exultation, doubt again, ever recurring, the whole capped and bound by determination. Once he stopped and, turning, stood looking at the moon-bathed towers of the palace. Only for a moment or two till an impatient gesture swung him round and sent him again on his way.

He had not gone far, however, when he was roused from his abstraction by a hubbub in the street. Recalling his mind to his surroundings, he saw under the half extinguished lights of an inn adjoining a play-house an excited group round what seemed to be two quarreling men. To avoid the vulgar obstruction, he crossed the street and walked quickly on. He had not gone more than a hundred paces when there came up behind him the sound of running footsteps. A man, bare-headed, and with a naked sword in his hand was flying as though for his life. The fellow wore military dress, and instead

of, as his pace and condition suggested, panting with fear, he laughed as he ran. His whole appearance was so extraordinary that Ludovic, standing by to let him pass, could not help saying, "What is the matter, friend?"

The man checked his speed and gave a searching look at his questioner.

"Come!" he cried, catching Ludovic's sleeve and trying to drag him on. "Get me out of this for the love of Heaven. Come, or I am a dead man!"

There was no fear in the fellow's face, indeed he seemed to take his situation as a joke, but his appeal was somehow so irresistible that Ludovic found himself hurrying on by his side.

They had not gone far, however, when sounds of pursuit were heard.

"They are after us still, the dogs," the man panted. "This comes of making myself cheap with *canaille* and crossing swords with a cowardly bully."

"You have run a man through?" Ludovic asked.

"Something like it. No; he ran himself on to my point, clumsy brute. But I doubt not it is a hanging matter. Don't empty your lungs any lower on my account, friend. It is not worth it. I am obliged for your company but we will part here. Perhaps we may meet again in the next world, it is not likely in this."

In spite of his devil-may-care speech there was a refinement about the man which rather interested Ludovic in him. The signs of pursuit were now uncomfortably near. "No, no," he urged quickly. "You must not be taken like this, man. You know the Jena Platz?"

"Well."

"Take this key, it will open the door of number eleven. I will throw these people off the scent and join you presently. Quick! Down there! It will take you straight."

With a gasp of thanks the man darted off down the street so narrow that its high houses screened all moonlight from its roadway. Ludovic ran on along the wider

thoroughfare at a pace which allowed the pursuers to draw well in sight of him. As he came into view they gave tongue like hounds; he sped on at a leisurely swing; they, with the zest of following an imagined blood-trail, came on now with a rush, caught him and prepared to pull him down. But as he turned and faced them they saw that he was the very contrast of their man. They howled for disappointment.

"Where is he? You have seen him running, the big fellow? He has killed a man. Which way did he take?"

"I saw him, yes; and ran after him. But his legs were better than mine and I lost sight of him in this street. You will catch him if you do not waste time. He cannot be far away."

One or two grumbled and looked suspicious, but the more ardent man-hunters ran on and the spirit of the chase was contagious. It was clear as the flooding moonlight that Ludovic was not the man nor one of his feather. He was left alone.

Without loss of time he turned his steps towards his lodging in the Jena Platz. His new acquaintance had not only found an asylum but had made himself quite at home therein; his comfortable attitude suggested nothing of a fugitive taking sanctuary. However, he received his host and preserver with a hearty expression of gratitude.

"You drew the dogs off cleverly; it was a good deed," he remarked with the glib coolness of a man whose wits and muscles have kept him going in an adventurous world; "a good deed, and one that will be recompensed elsewhere better than I can ever hope to repay it. You have a snug billet here; ah, well, it is my own fault if it is better than I have been accustomed to of late. Your face is unfamiliar, sir," he scrutinised him coolly. "No matter for that. It is the face I would have wagered on for a handsome action. You are new to this precious city of peacocks and kites with the big vulture hovering over all?"

"You mean the Chancellor? Yes. I have been here but a week. I come from Drax-Beroldstein."

"Ah! That's a fine bold land, with hot-headed men and pretty women. Yes; I have loved and fought there—as in a good many lands besides. But in truth I began to find the climate of your Beroldstein a trifle too warm for my complexion. I never could keep out of the blaze, you understand; it takes a sober fool to walk always on the shady side, and though I may have folly enough and to spare, sobriety is a vice I cannot confess to."

"Then you are just as well outside of Beroldstein," Ludovic laughed. "Will you fill a glass now? You may stand in need of refreshment after your late exertion."

He pointed to a side table on which decanters stood. His visitor showed no backwardness in pouring out a glass of spirits and tossing it off.

"Ah, yes," he observed with a meditative smack of the lips; "it was a ticklish affair. Always a woman; that is my experience, and I have tossed about the world enough to speak of its tides and currents, squalls and tempests with authority. Look now. At the play to-night—an infernally silly piece—a girl laughed at me. Could I help that? Or laughing back? The play was dull and the girl was pretty. What would you have? I am no priest to look like a saint and think like a devil. Well, our interchange of courtesies seemed to give offence to a smart fellow with a hawk's eye and a rabbit's heart, who wanted to monopolise the lady's glances. Was it my fault again if she preferred to look at my shock head than at his wonderful moustachios turned up to his eyes? The less my deserts the greater my gratitude. And this brave fellow, like many another, mistook gratitude for love. Anyhow he grew consumedly jealous, and when the play was over and I was ready to escort the lady through the crowd he tried to jostle me away. Jostle me!" He laughed, merrily scornful. "Me, who have

fought in half the countries of Europe; whose sword and a stout heart and arm behind it (pardon a passing boast) are my stock in trade. Naturally I did not give way, never yet quailed before a pair of fierce moustachios—pah! Albrecht von Ompertz frightened of a tuft of hair!—and never shall. He had to carry it boldly before the lady, and when two men are bold and not agreed, why, it means cold steel. He waited for me by the tavern, mad with rage and jealousy or—well, poor fellow, they will never trouble him again in this world. And so I have brought my neck uncomfortably near the hempen cravat. It was only when my point stuck in that I remembered the new decree against brawling. Well, what's done is done; one cannot blow the fire with burst bellows or get a dance out of a fellow with a skewered lung." He drained off another glass of spirits; his situation seemed to affect him as little as though it were but the loss of a few pieces at play.

"Von Ompertz, then your name is?" Ludovic said.

"Add Captain," the other replied with a mock bow and a flourish. "Devotedly at your service; I would say everlastingly did not that seem a big word from a man who has but a few more breathing hours before him. But for those you can command me, and what is more to the point, my sword." He took it up from the couch on which he had thrown it and glanced down the blade. "Don Moustachio's hot blood has bubbled away, it seems. Ah, this good little fellow and I have been through some tight squeezes, I tell you; some warm encounters, official and private, for personal considerations and for imperial motives. I have held commissions in pretty well half the states of Europe."

"A free lance, Captain?"

"Just so." He threw his arms out and then pushed back the shock of hair that fell across one side of his face like a half-drawn curtain.

"I love two things in a lesser degree, but they are comparative trifles as my old General Freiherr von Aremberg observed after Schweidnitz when he heard that a church full of people had been fired and its contents roasted. Yes, I have a keen nose for a quarrel, international or individual, and it is worth something to be free to follow one's sympathies, although that usually means enlisting on the weaker side. Well, if it is all over now, I've lived my life and with plenty of pepper to spice it."

All through Captain von Ompertz' voluble talk his host had been quietly observing him with amused interest. "You must get away, Captain," he said. "A man of your resource and experience is surely not going to hang about and be taken."

"Not if I can help it," the other replied cheerfully. "But get away is easier to say than to do in this country where Rollmar, the old spider, has his feelers out on every side. It is nothing but a big net, sir. We can move about, but we cannot fly, and when he wants to be down on us the spider moves quickest."

"And you, devotee of freedom, stay here," laughed Ludovic.

Ompertz gave a shrug. "The place is lively and is a good point from which to scan the horizon for a war cloud. And now—*donnerwetter!* what the devil did that fool with the moustachios want to draw on me for?"

It was arranged that Captain von Ompertz should stay there in hiding till a chance occurred of getting away in safety. His host left him comfortably stretched on a couch with a cloak wrapped round him. But when in the early morning Ludovic entered the room, his guest had flown, leaving a few scrawled lines of apology.

"I am none the less grateful because I cannot be a burden to you. The chance of escape over the net is as fair to-day as it will be to-morrow, and I hate suspense.

If I get clear away you shall hear from me (though I know not your name); if not you will assuredly hear of me. A thousand thanks from your grateful servant,
A. v. O."

CHAPTER IV

IN THE ROYAL CHAPEL

IT was in obedience to a very natural prompting that in his walks about the city Ludovic's feet should be inevitably turned in the direction of the palace. Perhaps he hoped—of course he did—that chance might give him a glimpse of that provoking beauty, Princess Ruperta. The fascination was intensified by the strange situation in which he had met her. For it showed an underlying stratum of a far different and warmer nature beneath the hard, frozen surface that the world saw and noted, and, try as it would, could make no impression upon. So! Princess Cold-heart was human after all. He laughed as he spoke the words in his solitary ramble. Human? yes. But what chance had the humanity, the girl's real feelings, to expand and flourish enmeshed in the rigid formality and etiquette, in the killing monotony of a German Court? And under the eye, benign and relentless, of that inscrutable, busy state-machine, the Chancellor Rollmar, what play-room could there be for a girl's spirits and enjoyment of life? Small wonder, he thought, if she broke bounds, careless because ignorant of danger. A girl of high-spirited temperament is not to be completely repressed even by an astute and autocratic Minister. Does not rebellion thrive on oppression?

Ludovic had come to Waldenthor well provided with credentials. Only a night or two after his arrival he had attended a Court ball; and it was from his sight of

the Princess on that occasion that he had been able to recognise her on the evening of her adventure. He was free of the Palace grounds, but after the affair at the fortune-teller's, he, from motives of delicacy, refrained from walking in them. He would not seem to take advantage of his service by forcing himself upon the notice of the Princess. To hover on the outskirts, though, was a greater temptation than he, perhaps, could resist. And at last the hovering grew so tantalising that he told himself there could be no harm in taking a short road to the city by the broad walk which ran through the royal park. His way took him within a few paces of the King's chapel. The tones of the organ in a subdued grandeur trembled out through the effigied windows. The witchery of the music, united with the glamour of the place, hallowed by romance ever since the days of chivalry, had an arresting effect. Ludovic stopped, took off his hat and leaning against a great elm, gave himself up to the entrancement of the moment.

Like a subtle spell the music stole out into the woodland till the quivering of the leaves seemed hushed by the charm; the place became fairyland, but the haunt of fairies of flesh and blood with souls for life and love, for dreams and hopes sweetening to fulfilment. If heaven was suggested there, it was heaven on earth.

There was a pause in the playing, but the spell which seemed to hold the listener was not broken. He remained motionless in his abstraction. Then the music floated out again in a lovely *Andante* of Scarlatti's. The dreamy look turned to animation, he must drink to the full of that divine melody; he went forward on tip-toe to a little door which stood ajar, pushed it gently open and stood raptly breathing in the glorious strain which, rising and falling, flooded the chapel as with an angel's song.

As the last notes trembled away along the groined roof Ludovic stole forward. The organ burst forth again. From where he stood a screen hid the player; by ad-

vancing a little farther he could see past it. Quietly he moved on, still the keyboard was hidden by a low curtain. But he saw something else which rewarded and at the same time rebuked his temerity, a girl working the handle of the bellows. It was Countess Minna, the Princess's companion. Half sitting on a stool, she with a pretty suggestion of boredom was giving, as occasion called for, a casual and now and then an impatient pull at the handle which projected like a bowsprit before her. One hand grasped this, with the other she held up a book, but the necessity of not keeping her eyes too long off the leaden indicator must have made reading a somewhat tantalising pleasure. She would give a slow mechanical pull or two at the lever, then presently glancing up and seeing the wind nearly gone she would take both hands and giving a sufficient number of vicious tugs to bring the lead to its lowest point, she would return to her book. It was at one of these more energetic pumpings that the intruder's presence caught her eye. She started and her face lengthened into an expression of humorous, half scandalized astonishment. This distraction lasted so long that the lead crept up unnoticed and the wind gave out bringing the melody to an abrupt and wheezy halt.

"Minna!" The Princess's voice only confirmed the certainty Ludovic had felt as to the player.

"Pardon!" Minna energetically seized the handle and gave several vigorous pulls. "My book was so exciting that I forgot."

The melody rose again, the absorbing book lay on the floor, and for a while the bellows received a pretty girl's full, almost feverish, attention.

Presently she looked again at Ludovic and made a comic expression of disgust. He stood irresolute, telling himself that he ought to go, yet yielding to the temptation to linger. The girl's facial suggestion was now supplemented, after a vehement sending down of the indicator, by a pantomime of weariness. There must have

been an object in these signals, yet Ludovic did not take the hint. So Minna, abandoning vagueness, plainly beckoned to him, making signs that he should take her place at the bellows. The invitation could scarcely be disregarded. He came forward and took his position by the lever, while the girl slipped away and settling herself on a more comfortable bench, avidiously resumed her exciting story.

For about half an hour the music continued, Ludovic gravely keeping to his work at the bellows, and Minna, save for an occasional sly upward glance, seeming absorbed in her book. There were breaks in the playing between the ending of one piece and the beginning of another. In one interval of silence, as Ludovic stood waiting for the organ to swell out again, he looked up and saw the Princess standing before him. His involuntary glance at her face told him nothing. He bowed low.

"Pardon, Princess," he said soberly, "the Countess was tired and I ventured to take her place."

Minna had sprung up and came forward with a look of mingled apprehension and sly enjoyment of the situation.

"It is true, Highness," she corroborated. "My arms began to ache and my book was so exciting that I asked Herr von Bertheim to blow till I had rested and the duel was over. One cannot blow the organ properly when one is in a state of terrific suspense."

The Princess's face gave no indication of how she took the situation.

"It is perhaps more a man's work," she said coldly. "I am obliged to Herr von Bertheim. I did not know he was in the chapel."

Still no sign whether his presence gave her offence or not.

"I was passing down the Broad Walk when the music stopped me and drew me in," he explained. "I had no

idea, until I saw the Countess, that the player was your Highness."

"It is perhaps an unusual thing," she returned with a touch of bitterness, "to find a person in my position cultivating an art. I do not know whether it is one of the things we are bidden to leave to the less exalted, and not meddle with. Your ignorance can scarcely be blamed, sir."

"I cannot blame it, Princess, unless my presence has given you offence."

"That ought never to be," she returned quickly, "seeing how welcome it once has been."

"I could never presume on that chance service," he said simply.

"No." She spoke abstractedly, mechanically. Minna had fidgetted away behind the screen to the door, perhaps on the watch. "That makes it all the more acceptable," the Princess added in the same distant tone, a tone which impelled him to reply.

"I take the hint, Highness."

He half turned away, when the murmur of her voice recalled him.

"You need not take more than is meant to be given," she said, and there was a sweetness in her tone he had never heard before. She gave a quick glance to where Minna stood, and then added, "If I seem far less grateful than an"—she gave a little shrug—"an ordinary woman would be you must not impute the churlishness to me but to my position. It is one of the attributes of royalty to be above the common feelings of the outside world." The words seemed forced from her, the vent of a grievance, long resented, ever dwelt on. The situation was but an opportunity not the cause of its expression.

"I never could dream of imputing anything but graciousness to your Highness," Ludovic protested eagerly. "I have no right here, I know: but being free of the

Court I ventured to cross the park on my way home. Then the music caught my ear and I came in, thinking to listen without being seen."

She was looking away, now her glance fell on him. "You come to Court?" she asked in a tone that was scarcely indifferent and yet tantalisingly vague.

"I had the honour to be present at the Hof-Ball last week."

"Ah, I wondered——"

He understood that she was thinking of his recognition of her at the fortune-teller's. His next words seemed surprisingly bold.

"Your Highness often plays here? Is it too much to ask to be allowed to officiate as organ-blower again?"

A little hardening of the Princess's face told him that his temerity was resented. She gave him no answer. "Minna!" she called, "Come, dear; it is late."

But before Minna could reach them he had spoken again.

"Pardon, Highness," he said with great restraint yet urgently. "You have not forbidden me."

But she spoke no word to him again. "Come, dear," she said, linking her arm in Minna's, and so they went across the chancel to the royal entrance leading by a covered way to the palace. He stood looking after them hoping for what he knew was beyond hope. Minna opened the door and the Princess passed out of sight without a backward look. Minna glanced round with an inscrutable laugh.

CHAPTER V

RUPERTA AND LUDOVIC

SHE had not forbidden him. Even when reminded of it the suggestion had not provoked a word of refusal. And yet she had gone without a sign of leave-taking, but with all the air of being offended. What was he to think? Turn it over as his mind would, it always came back to the one conclusion that he would go to the chapel again. "We are not allowed the feelings of ordinary people," the Princess had said. Did not that account for the way she had recollected herself, or at least her station, and left him without another word? But she had talked with him for some time before that bold speech of his—lucky or unlucky, he would not own it either—she had assuredly shown no offence at finding him there in the chapel, at his presumption in assisting at her playing. Was that because he had done her a service at the fortune-teller's? It was not a palatable suggestion, still less was it pleasant to think that his forwardness might be construed into a presuming upon that service. At any rate he would put it to the touch.

For the next days he haunted the park near the chapel but without hearing the music he listened for, or seeing the Princess except once when he caught just a glimpse of her driving in at the royal gates. But one afternoon, when he had begun to think that the organ was never to speak to him again, his ear caught its notes, softly penetrating, stealing out into the woodland. For a mo-

ment he hesitated. No; he had resolved to venture boldly; diffidence would avail nothing; after all, he knew his every feeling to be chivalrous; he would not hang back.

The door was opened. Ah, it might have been closed against him. He went in quietly; Countess Minna was at the bellows; she laughed, and her laugh told him that she, at least, had expected him. He returned her silent greeting and without hesitation went up and took the lever which she very readily relinquished. The music continued for a long hour, ever sharpening his hunger for a sight of the player, for the thrill of her voice again. Minna, as before, sat comfortably reading, with a certain demure enjoyment on her face, but whether caused by the book or the situation was not to be told. As each piece ended von Bertheim looked for that radiant presence to stand before him, and at each fresh swelling forth of the organ he felt a disappointment which, with his love of music, might have been incredible.

At length with the dying vibrations of a voluntary's last notes there mingled the striking of a clock. Countess Minna jumped up hastily and ran forward.

"Princess! It is time to go. There is five striking."

A wave of disappointment passed over him. Should he lose his reward like that? Was it a trick? As he wondered, the Princess came from behind the keyboard screen and saw him. Their eyes met; he bowed.

"Thank you," she said simply. "It was kind of you to relieve Gräfin Minna."

He had come near; she, preparing to turn away, held out her hand. He pressed it to his lips. That was all, except for the word "Good-bye," which he scarcely heard, and the "thank you," from Countess Minna which he heard not at all. Before he could realise their departure he was alone.

When he returned to his lodgings he found an official invitation to a state concert to be held two days later. It

meant the chance, certainly of seeing, perhaps speaking to the Princess. That afternoon's luck had rewarded his days of disappointment. She had given him her hand in token that in her eyes he was free from offence. "She has a heart after all," he said as he sat down to write an acceptance.

The concert was as rigidly classical as though the severity of the Court's forms and etiquette had infected the music, as, indeed, it had drawn out the programme. Only in one piece was indulgence given to mere beauty of melody, and in that he recognised a favourite of the Princess's doubtless, since she had played it both times he had been in the chapel. Carried away by the sensuousness of the melody he sat with eyes almost involuntarily fixed on the Princess. She was unlikely to notice his gaze, but the inevitable Minna looked round towards the side row where he sat, and he suddenly became aware of her scrutiny. He wondered whether she would tell Princess Ruperta of his whereabouts, but by no sign could he be certain of that. "Why should she care? What a fool I am!" he told himself.

When the music was over the guests followed the royal party into the great drawing-room, where they circulated and chatted in groups. With his white face bent forward and hands clasped behind his back the Chancellor strolled observantly through the rooms exchanging a remark here and there, but ever on the watch, it seemed.

Ludovic von Bertheim stood looking after that fascinating, inscrutable personality when he heard a well-remembered voice at his side.

"When you have finished studying our Chancellor, Herr von Bertheim, may I ask you to give me a cup of coffee?"

They strolled off together to the Saal where refreshments were served.

"It is delightful to meet you here again, Ludovic said; "after——"

"Where there are no organ-bellows to blow?" Minna suggested roguishly. "Oh! Hush!" She made a gesture of caution and raised her cup to her lips. Rollmar was passing them.

"I did not know he was so near," she observed, in a low tone. "He has ears for whispers and eyes that see all round him. I warn you, Herr von Bertheim."

"I will be careful," he laughed.

"Yes. Not only for your own sake, but——" she checked herself with a shrug. "You see that young officer with red hair and eyes to match, like a ferret? You will never guess who he is. Our wonderful Chancellor's son. Yes, you may well open your eyes. Captain von Rollmar; he is as sharp as his face, and—— shall I tell you?—a great admirer of our Princess."

She took a roguish delight in watching the effect of her whisper, laughing and sipping her coffee.

"The admiration is hardly returned, I should think," he could not help saying.

"You should hope so, eh?" she corrected. "What do you think? The Princess is a girl of taste. I have—not exactly a message for you, but I know the lady we speak of is anxious to hear about your country. You know, perhaps she is to marry your future King?"

"I have heard the rumour."

"Poor girl! It is a shame."

"Why a shame?"

"Because she hates him."

"Has she ever seen him?"

"No. Is that a necessary preliminary in royal betrothals?"

"Perhaps not. But surely to hate."

"Hates the idea, then."

"Ah, that is conceivable."

"The comfort, or the absurdity, of it is that he seems

to be, if possible, as indifferent to her as she to him."

"That can be only accounted for by his never having seen her."

"Whose fault is that? He has never even asked for her portrait. He is away, no one knows where, on a hunting expedition. To ignore, no doubt, the disagreeable fate in store for him, and to try to forget while he can that there is such an annoying thing on earth as woman in general and our Princess in particular."

Their talk had taken them through the picture gallery and out upon the terrace, for on that warm autumn night the long windows stood open. They had gone but a few steps when a well-known voice said :

"Minna, I have been looking for you. I was stifled in these hot rooms."

As Ludovic bowed to the Princess a casual onlooker would have said it was a first and formal introduction; and perhaps with the Chancellor's many eyes everywhere, that was as well. A court official came sauntering along, evidently getting a little relief from the boredom of his duties. Countess Minna threw him a laughing remark to that effect. He stopped and they stood chatting within two or three paces of the Princess and von Bertheim.

"I hear, Highness," Ludovic said presently, "that you are interested in the country I come from."

"I cannot help being interested," she replied. Then as the equivocal meaning of the words struck her, she added hastily, "It is not my fault if it is so."

"I have heard a rumour, Princess," he said quietly.

"Ah, yes; a rumour. It is only a rumour as yet." It was impossible to gather from her tone what meaning lay behind her words. "Tell me of your country," she went on. She was looking away over the black screen of trees at the star-lit sky, and the words seemed forced mechanically through the dreamy pre-occupation that held her. "It is a pleasant one?"

"A fair land enough," he answered, "with great vine-

covered plains and rounded hills with lovely broad valleys and nestling towns. Yes, it is a land too pleasant and favoured to lie longer in obscurity. Our King——”

“Never mind your king,” she broke in almost haughtily; “he does not interest me. Tell me of your country. Has it rocks and dashing rivers, and great forests, like ours?”

“A few only. Scenery like yours is not general.”

“Scenery!” she repeated, with an inflection of some thing like scorn. “You speak of that as though it were of no account. It is everything. It is nature. It makes all the difference between romance and a dull, sordid reality. Your king”—there was scorn now in her voice unmistakably—“is, I suppose, intent upon making his country of commercial importance. The grapes from your vines are to be transferred to the taverns and shops of London and Paris, and as the drunkards of the world increase so will your country’s prosperity. Prosperity? That means money. I hate that. Why cannot this king of yours leave his people happy as they are? Does money mean content? I would rather be a mother to the poor than to the rich, rather reign over my country as Heaven made it, with its crags and torrents and forests, than over a land of wine-vats and offices where legends and traditions are ousted by account-books and bills, and the people in their insolence of wealth acknowledge in their hearts but one king—money. Here, at least, we are free, or nearly all of us,” she added, a little bitterly.

“But, Princess,” he began to argue, “if the two countries were joined, would not the best characteristics of both be united?”

“Never,” she returned impatiently; “it is impossible. Romance and business can never agree.” She gave a little shiver. “We catch the wind here,” she said, returning to her cold, indifferent tone. “Minna, it is cold. We will walk to the end of the terrace.”

The moments were precious, yet to von Bertheim it

seemed difficult to make the most of them. The change in his companion's tone showed him that she considered at an end the subject on which she had spoken so warmly. In her fascinating complexity, in the manifest struggle between constraint and inclination, between the yearning for freedom and the sense of coercion, in short between the Princess and the woman, there was something bewilderingly captivating and yet deterrent.

"You cannot think," she resumed, breaking the silence, "what it is for those who are born to high places to be condemned to see most of the pleasures of life from a distance. They are all round us, but out of reach. We are like poor ragged children gazing into the toy-shop windows. Yes; we are supposed to have everything, and we have—almost nothing." She spoke with a suppression of the feeling which prompted the words. Ludovic could guess why she was inclined to unburden herself to him.

"You think I must look upon our first meeting as a strange one," he said. "But I have seen too much of the world, have speculated too much over the problems of our mysterious existence to wonder at that. Ah, Princess—forgive me if your confidence makes me too bold—I wish it might fall to my lot to free you from the grip of the world's custom, as it was my unspeakable privilege to stand between you and that thieving ruffian."

The end of the terrace walk had been reached, and as with the last words they turned, it brought them face to face. Had he offended her? He could not tell. The cold, proud look in her face made it seem almost incredible that it could have been she who had spoken with such feeling and unburdening of the heart a moment before. Just for a few instants she made no reply; perhaps the mere expression of his wish scarcely called for one. The silence left him in exquisite suspense. So intent was he on her next words that he did not realise she lingered, almost stopped. Countess Minna and her companion had

turned at the same time and were walking now in front. At last the reply came.

"You are bold,"—the voice was exquisitely low—"but in you I cannot blame boldness. It is," here by an effort she lightened her tone, "it is perhaps as well we can both realise that beyond boldness it is madness, boldness to me, and madness to aught beside."

"Not madness," he protested, "to dream of fighting for happiness, for——"

"Yes," she interrupted quickly, almost peremptorily; "madness to imagine and cruelty to suggest it. Ah!" she gave a shudder, "why are right things so easily forgotten, wrong ones never? It is late; I must go in. The dear Chancellor," she laughed, "will be scandalised—or worse. You are leaving Waldenthor?"

"I never said so, Princess."

"But you are going?"

"Not unless your highness orders me."

"Or somebody more powerful than I. Yes; you had better go. The romance, the episode is over; would you wait for the anti-climax?"

"Is it over, Princess?" His voice vibrated with tenderness now, since he might be bold.

"We have arrived at the best ending," she answered. "Do not wait for an unpleasant one."

"Give me a better reason for banishment."

"Than yourself? Is not the only other reason obvious?"

He bowed his head. That reason was all powerful. "I understand, Princess," he replied. "Then I go. Is this the last time we shall meet?"

There was sadness in the proud eyes, he could be sure of that. But with characteristic self-control she forced it away. "Who can tell?" she laughed. "We may meet again before very long—in your country. There, Minna is signing to me. I know what that means. Good-bye, my friend, good-bye, and thank you."

She was moving off, but he took a quick step after her. "Princess," he pleaded, "give me one day's respite. Let me hear the music in the chapel again."

But she would not stop or turn to give him an answer. He thought he caught the murmur of one word "Madness!" as she hurried away.

CHAPTER VI

THE ORGAN'S PRISONER

THE birds in the woodland surrounding the royal chapel sang lustily, as though exulting in the fact that the tones of their great opponent, the organ, were for once so soft and weak as to yield them an easy victory in the game of out-singing one another. The lowness of tone in the dragging melody seemed to be the interpretation of a heavy heart; it spoke the language of sadness and of parting.

Ludovic had taken his place early beside the organ, but had waited long for the player; long, indeed, past her usual hour. Waited till he was forced to ask himself whether the last night had not been the end of that informal, delicious acquaintance. Was he never to see the Princess again, at least as he had known her? Never again watch fascinated for those sweet glimpses of the sun breaking through the cold mist? There was so much he had to tell her, that he felt he dared say now, if only the chance were not gone. He waited, hoping and despairing, till the afternoon seemed turning to evening; he watched the door through which she would come till he hated it for mocking him with its immovability. At last, when he was sure that the parting was over, unrealized, he looked up to see the door open and the Princess and Countess Minna coming towards him.

Eagerly he went forward; ah! she was so cold. There was no trace of the feeling she had given glimpses of the

night before. The hand that touched his lips was as chill as a statue's. She had repented, yet why, then, had she come? There was, at least, no sign of disapproval in that stately greeting. She went straight to the keyboard, he to his post, Countess Minna, unusually serious, to her accustomed corner. So the music began to float gently through the place; it was, or at least seemed, less interesting to him than usual; he had so much to say, and the soft introit interposed between him and his desire. Still, he could but wait; it was not for him to pluck open the blossom of his hopes before his glorious sun should ripen them. He was content to be near her, thankful that she had come, overjoyed yet sad to think what her presence meant. When the playing was over what would her words be? Not so frigid as her greeting surely; yet the very coldness gave to her slightest unbending a value far surpassing the warmth of an impulsive nature.

The sinking sun struck horizontally through the richly tinted windows, and the shadows of the trees, just stirred by the almost windless atmosphere, danced slowly and languidly on the wall, the pillars and richly carved stalls, as though keeping time and character with the music. The sands of his last day were running low, the dreamy music, though he loved it, made him impatient. Then an idea came to him. Why should he not ask Countess Minna to release him and take his place, so that he might go round and be at least within sight of the Princess? He hesitated. Would she not be offended if he broke the tacit understanding between them? Certainly her reception of him had given no encouragement to impatience or forwardness. It was his duty to respect her slightest hint, to let the initiative always come from her, above all, never to make her task (if he dared believe it were one) more difficult. Yet every argument failed against his intense desire. He looked round at the demure reader coiled up snugly in her corner; she glanced up as his movement caught her eye, and laughed as he signed to her. Then

she shook her head; she was sharp enough, and guessed what he wanted, but—perhaps she, too, thought it madness. Anyhow it was with a deprecating expression that she rose and came to him.

“Will you not relieve me for five minutes?” he asked.

She kept her hands behind her. “Why?” she asked. “You are surely not tired.”

“No; not tired, but——”

“The Princess hates any one to look over her.”

“May I not see her from a distance?”

“You are a fool, with apologies for the liberty of telling you so, Herr Lieutenant.”

“I dare say I am. But why?”

“Too long for fruit that is out of your reach.”

“Perhaps. Still I shall not say it is sour.”

“Heaven forbid! No, you will not do that. Look! Quick! The wind is out. Pump for your life! So! Shall I tell you further why you are a fool?”

“If you please.”

“Because you do not seem to have the sense to know what would happen if your organ-blowing were to come under the notice of our Chancellor.”

“I can guess.”

“The grapes would be sour, at least they would set your teeth on edge, though your sense of taste would soon be over.”

“I dare say.”

“And yet it is worth the risk, eh? It is well that you are brave. This is the last time we meet here.”

“As the Princess wills.”

“She has willed it. I told her she was a—not wise to come to-day. You don’t think of me and the risk I run. I am not anxious to meet you in the next world yet. There! as you are brave, and this is truly the last time, give me the handle. But you will worry the Princess.”

With a word of thanks he had turned towards the front of the organ, when her voice called him back

sharply. "Take care! We are watched. Bend down quickly."

She sprang forward and pushed him away, taking his place at the handle. "Keep under the curtain," she directed, pumping away vigorously. "Out of sight. A man is looking through the window. I just saw his head from where I stood. It was Udo Rollmar. If he sees you—ah, he must not see you. Hist! there he is again."

Peeping through a slight parting in the curtains that screened the organ-blower's seat, Ludovic could see a foxy face looking in through one of the leaded panes. He remembered what Countess Minna had told him of the Chancellor's son, that he was in love with the Princess.

"I am not afraid of that fellow," he said. "Why should I hide from him?"

Minna threw up her hand in distress. "Oh, you idiot! You will ruin us all. Can you not think of the Princess? Now will you hide? Quickly! He is surely coming in. Oh, we are ruined! We are lost!"

The face had disappeared from the window. The situation was critical. At any moment Captain Rollmar might show himself over the screen. Minna was beside herself with terror, while the music still floated out under the fingers of the unconscious player.

"Oh, this is awful!" she gasped in despair, looking helplessly round the trap in which they seemed caught. "Ah!" She pointed to the narrow door which gave admittance to the interior of the organ. "In there, for Heaven's sake!" she besought him. But he hesitated and hung back.

"It is unnecessary," he objected quietly.

Even in her distress she could not help marvelling at his coolness.

"You are mad, or, at least, horribly selfish," she exclaimed indignantly. "If you are tired of your life because you cannot have what you want, I promise you I

am not. Man, to save the Princess's honour and my life, will you not go in there till the danger is past?"

She spoke with rapid vehemence, trembling with fear and excitement.

"I will obey you," he said with a half laugh, and entered the narrow opening. She shut and fastened the door, and then sprang back to the bellows handle. Just in time; for she had scarcely given one vigorous pull when the curtain parted, and the expected face appeared. She affected to give a start and a little scream.

"Ah, Captain, how you frightened me. I thought it was the devil, who they say once came after a priest in this very chapel."

His suspicious eyes were searching the place as he replied with a cunning smile, "It is neither the devil nor a priest this time, little Minna, although if the old gentleman has taste he would be more attracted by the organ-blower than by the clergy."

She made him a mocking curtsy, and, by design or accident, let the wind run off, bringing the music to a stop.

"Highness!" she cried, "here is Captain von Rollmar."

If it was in apprehension that the Princess joined them she did not show it.

"May I blow for you, Princess?" Captain Udo asked with a bow.

"Thank you, I have finished playing," she returned coldly. "The light is fading. Come, Minna."

The vulpine eyes were feasting on her, so contemptuously majestic in comparison with his cunning insignificance. "Do not hurry away," he suggested with all a vain, clever man's self-confidence. "It is pleasant here."

"Yes; but we have stayed long enough. It grows chilly. Let us go, Minna."

Minna had placed herself a little behind the Captain,

so that, unseen by him, she could give her mistress a warning glance.

"We might stroll out into the park," she suggested, "if your Highness is agreeable. It is a delicious evening, and Captain von Rollmar would be our escort."

The proposal suited the Captain exactly, and as for the Princess she comprehended the intention behind it and agreed. So the three went out together, leaving Ludovic a prisoner in the organ.

They walked up and down the great avenue till it was time to go in, Captain Udo in such a state of content that the amiability working out in his expression almost eclipsed its foxiness. He was too happy to think of suspicion. It was dusk when they turned up a path leading to one of the private entrances of the palace. But there was hardly any scandal to fear in the company of the Chancellor's son; at least the wily old terror would have to keep his blame at home.

"Oh, Highness," Minna cried suddenly, "I have left my book back in the chapel. How stupid I am! May I run back for it? You shall not wait for me a minute."

"Does the book matter?" the Princess asked.

"Oh, Highness," she replied with a humorous look of entreaty, "it is so interesting, and I have promised myself such a delicious hour with it to-night. May I run?"

"You are a spoilt child, Minnchen," her mistress laughed.

Captain Udo made a half-hearted offer to fetch the book, but Minna decided that he might not find it at once; she knew exactly where it was. He should stay with the Princess for the one short minute the errand would take. Accordingly he, nothing loath, remained and Minna sped off to the chapel. Only to find the door locked.

The book must indeed be interesting to make her look so troubled at its loss, Captain Udo thought as she rejoined them empty-handed. But she would send a servant for it, she said.

"You might have thought of that before, and saved yourself the trouble, silly child," the Princess remarked.

And Ludovic von Bertheim remained imprisoned in the organ. His was a curious nature, for the situation amused him, and yet in itself it was by no means pleasant. The space was confined, the atmosphere close and dusty. But for a few feeble rays of light which stole in between the pipes he was in darkness. And yet he laughed. He heard the heavy footsteps of the sacristan, then the clang of the locked door, and still he laughed. The situation had its charm; not a very obvious one. That he was a prisoner was certain enough; he had tried the little door; it was securely fastened on the outside; no doubt he could kick it open, but that would be a last resort. Perhaps he did not want to burst it open. The tortuous pathways in the organ, known only to the tuner, were not inviting; he resolved to leave them untried, and await his release where he was, meanwhile making himself as comfortable as he could. So he stayed, for hours it seemed, for he could not see his watch. Dusk deepened into night; the moonlight streaming faintly through the coloured windows could not penetrate that thicket of pipes and levers; the darkness was as complete and oppressive as the silence.

Perhaps it was from having grown accustomed to the intense silence that his ear at length detected a light footfall; he listened alertly, it came near; yes, his ear had not played him false, the step was just by him, only separated by a thin partition. The latch was turned and the door opened. So used had his eyes become to the darkness that even the subdued moonlight for a moment dazzled him, but without a question he made haste to leave his uncomfortable prison.

"A pretty penance you have made me pay, Countess," he laughed, then stopped short with a great thrill. It

was not the Countess Minna, whom he had looked for, but the Princess.

For a moment he could not speak; only stare at her as she stood before him, the dim light and shadow heightening her beauty by affording of it no more than a suggestion.

"You, Princess?"

The low tone vibrated with recognition as though struck from the depth of his heart. It was eloquent of an acknowledgment that could not be spoken.

"Minna came long ago to release you, but found the chapel locked up."

Her calm tone was in strong contrast to his fervent ejaculation:—

"Thank Heaven for that!"

A ray of moonlight, guided by a moving branch, stole along the organ screen and for a moment lighted up her face.

"And you have come, my Princess." He spoke in a rapturous whisper, for the intoxication of her beauty, the splendid graciousness of her presence bereft him of voice. How could he address her as he would have spoken to Countess Minna?

There was a suggestion of sad playfulness in her tone as she replied. "Was it not fitting that I should return the service you rendered me, and free you? But, indeed, I came to say good-bye!"

Her face was now in the dim shadow again and somehow he felt glad of it. There are joys so great that they suddenly turn to torture.

"Must it be?" he said pleadingly.

"You know it must be," she answered in the same repressed tone.

"You are going," he said, "to marry Prince Ludwig against your will."

"Whether that be or not it can make no difference to

us," she replied still coldly. Ah, if he might only hear her speak again with the warmth of last night.

"I cannot leave you, my Princess, even at your bidding."

"You are unkind to disobey."

"If you wish me to go, if you will be happier in the knowledge that you will never set eyes on me again——"

"It is not a question of happiness."

"Of duty?"

She threw back her head and forced a laugh. "It is a matter, as I said last night, of madness or sanity."

"Then let me be mad."

"No, no."

"Let me stay, if only to breathe the same air, to see you, far off, yet to see you, to wake every morning with a hope——"

"No, no!" Ah, her heart was sending warmth into her voice at last.

"You cannot be so cruel, my Princess." He was pleading now with desperate earnestness. "Let me stay near you."

"It is you that are cruel. You must go."

"Ah, think how you say that. You are my queen, my goddess; I must obey you. I am to go? Tell me! Tell me!"

She wavered. She was a woman, circumscribed, starved of love and joy. They were within her reach now, could she keep back her hand from taking them? Madness, she kept telling herself. Yes, but what a delicious madness. The strain was at breaking point, then suddenly it was relieved. Her innate resolution and pride came to her rescue. With an intense effort she put forth all her strength blindly in a last effort, and such was her power of repression that the struggle, the desperate crisis were but faintly indicated.

"Yes; you are to go."

For very chivalry he could urge her no farther. A

shadow passed across the chapel. "Princess!" Minna's voice was heard in a low call of warning.

The Princess turned apprehensively. "I must go. Good-bye," she said.

She gave him her hand. He seized it in both of his and raised it with a swift passionate action to his lips. "It is indeed farewell, dear Princess? I am to go?"

She did not speak; he raised his head and looked in her face for an answer, still keeping her hand in his. Impulsively, before he could realize the action, she had bent forward and touched his cheek with her lips. "Stay," she said, "my love."

"Princess, are you mad? You will be missed," Minna cried, suddenly appearing. "Run for your life! I will let Herr von Bertheim out."

The hastening push she gave him seemed to wake him from a delicious dream. Next moment he was outside the chapel and alone.

CHAPTER VII

OMPERTZ DRIVES A BARGAIN

“**N**O news of Prince Ludwig?” the Duke enquired. The Chancellor shook his head. “None. He seems to have cut himself off from news. It is tiresome.”

“After all,” said his highness, “there is no great hurry.”

“There is hurry,” Rollmar contradicted. There were occasions when he did not concern himself to be too deferential to his master, and this was one of them. “It is quite time that the Prince at least showed himself. The effect on the Princess of this indifference may be disastrous.”

“I hardly think that,” the Duke objected with a weak man’s decision; a stupid man’s confidence in his own judgment. “*Omne ignotum*——”

“The application of the aphorism is wide,” rejoined Rollmar bluntly, “but it does not embrace royalties.”

“Oh?” questioned the Duke, feeling that it had very often included himself.

“No,” the schoolmaster maintained with an expression of something like contempt for his royal pupil. “Decidedly not where political expediency is in the air. If it were a simple lieutenant of cavalry, now, instead of the heir to a throne, the *pro magnifico* might apply. A young soldier has possibilities to every woman, a prince only to those of the middle classes.”

"You don't know Ruperta"

"I know women," the Councillor retorted dryly. "Royalty has no charms for them until they are over thirty-five."

"Oh, you think so?" the Duke said doubtfully, having no more definite argument ready. "I thought a good deal more of it before I was that age than I do now."

"Is it possible?" The Duke looked for the sneer he knew was there, but it was only to be felt, not seen, so he had no excuse for offence. "Your Highness was not—a woman."

That was the worst of Rollmar; his cleverness was useful, indispensable, his stinging tongue abominable. Duke Theodor often wished his minister less able, that he might afford to do without, or at any rate, with less of him. To have it conveyed to you daily, even under the cloak of homage, that your crown covers a pair of ass's ears is galling; it needs a full and constant supply of self-opinion for its constant rejection. Happily in Duke Theodor's case the flow showed no signs of failing.

"You think," he suggested, drawing back from the thin ice at its ominous crack, "you think my daughter will take offence at the cavalier way in which Prince Ludwig seems inclined to treat the business?"

Rollmar protruded his under jaw. "I don't know whether the Princess will take offence, but the question is whether she may not take a fancy to someone else, someone visible and tangible, which Prince Ludwig at present is not.

"I should hope," said the Duke pompously, "my daughter would not do that."

"I should hope so, too," Rollmar added dryly.

"It is impossible," his highness declared, nettled at the doubt in the other's tone.

"It is not only possible, but highly probable," the Chancellor declared boldly.

"What makes you say that, Baron?"

"My knowledge of human nature, your Highness."

There was no denying that knowledge which had often done the state good service. So the Duke did not think it wise to protest further.

"You have suspicions?" he enquired.

"Happily, none—as yet."

"What do you propose? To find this young man and bring him to his senses?"

"Precisely; your Highness's forethought has anticipated my intention." The astute old man made a point of always crediting the royal brains with any little balance that might be due to them.

"It would be well to have the affair settled," the Duke murmured, hoping he might not be called upon to suggest a plan for the reclaiming of the Prince.

"It must be settled," the Minister returned stooping over his papers.

The note of determination was enough to show that the furtherance of the object might well be left to the wily old brain for its best accomplishment. The Duke dismissed the subject with a yawn of relief. The discussion of family arrangements with Rollmar had usually the result of making him feel uncomfortable. The armour-plate of mere dignity is a trifle thin for the shots of intellect.

"To change the subject, I hope your Highness is resolved to second my efforts in the direction of order by strictly enforcing the brawling edict," the Chancellor observed, in a tone less of enquiry than injunction.

"Why, certainly, certainly," his highness responded.

"A man was killed in the streets a few nights since," Rollmar continued; "outside the Hof-Theater. This sort of thing is abominable and cannot be permitted. Brawling leads to riot and riot to revolution."

"Heaven forbid," ejaculated the Duke.

"It must be put down with a strong hand."

"Assuredly, Baron. I leave that to you."

"Clemency is entirely out of place, your Highness."

"None shall be shewn. Is the offender in this case under arrest?"

"Unfortunately not, Sire. But he is well known, and is sure to be taken. I have made a point of insisting that he shall not escape."

"Good. Yes, we must put down disorder even at the cost of a little disagreeable severity, eh, Baron?"

"Better tighten the strap than lose the helmet," Rollmar observed with grim sententiousness, and took his leave.

In his cabinet he heard that the peccant Captain von Ompertz had been caught and clapped into jail. "That is well," he commented in a tone that promised scant mercy for the rollicking *sabreur*.

Doubtless it was because his chief thoughts just then were concentrated on the alliance he had determined to bring about, that when a scrawled note from the newly caged one was apologetically laid before him in which the prisoner insisted that if an interview were granted him he could lay before the Chancellor a certain fact that had come to his knowledge which might have an important bearing on the projected marriage, he, after tossing the message aside contemptuously, astonished his subordinate by ordering Captain von Ompertz to be brought to him. Presently the jovial swashbuckler was ushered in and, at a sign from the Minister, left alone with him.

"Well, Captain, so you are caught at last. What have you to say?"

Rollmar had lifted his head from the writing before him and, leaning back, regarded the prisoner with a careless but none the less searching look. A greater contrast between two men could hardly have been found. The standing figure, big, brawny, workmanlike, with the round, weather-tanned face crowned by a mass of thick fair hair, the shabby half-military dress with the empty

scabbard eloquent of duress, the air jaunty with its suggestion of an unquenchable spirit; then the other personality, mind, as it were, confronting matter, small, wizened almost, the dress neat but scrupulously simple, the face seamed with a lifetime of deep thought and restless ambition, placid now as he surveyed the rough man at his ease, save for the suggestion of energy and power in the fierce, inscrutable eyes fixed on his visitor. To do von Ompertz justice it must be said that he never for a moment seemed to quail under the glance in which could be read life or death with the chances all inclining towards the latter.

"Yes, Excellency; I have been caught, unfortunately," the soldier replied bluffly. "My own fault. I was fool enough to come back like a fox to my hole when I might easily have scampered across the frontier."

"The law," observed Rollmar, with his characteristic trick of sententiousness, "is ever ready to acknowledge its indebtedness to a criminal's own want of common-sense."

A shadow of sternness fell over the prisoner's face as he said, "Your pardon, Excellency, I am no criminal."

"You are a law-breaker," Rollmar returned coldly. "A brawler, a manslayer."

"I drew in self-defence," von Ompertz protested hotly. The only reply was a shrug.

"My only offence was that I happened to be a better swordsman than the man who attacked me."

The Chancellor took up a pen and beat it carelessly on his hand. "I do not propose to try the merits of the case," he said with cutting indifference to the other's protest. "That is for the judge. You have a communication to make to me. I have no time to waste in listening to anything else."

For a moment, so stinging was the old man's tone, Ompertz looked as though he would meet it by a hot refusal. But the irritation was put aside as he replied with

a laugh, "I thought it as well to justify the condition I am going to make."

Rollmar raised his eyebrows. "Condition?"

"Naturally," the prisoner returned boldly. "I am not going to throw a chance away. A secret of state importance has come to me in extraordinary fashion. I want my liberty; not much to ask, since my only crime was to prevent myself being run through by a moustachioed booby who was the real brawler."

"His Highness," said Rollmar, "has declared to me within the hour that he will show no mercy towards disturbers of the peace."

"Then my secret will go to the gollows with me. And to the woeful disturbance, I fear, of his Highness's peace."

The inscrutable old man was probably anxious, certainly curious, but he did not show it. "I can but lay your case before the Duke," he said with a shrug. "It all depends upon the nature of this secret of yours. It may be nothing; it may be known to us."

"It is neither, Excellency."

"It concerns——" the Chancellor reached for the mis-sive as though he had forgotten the contents, "the royal marriage? Ah! What can you know of that?" he questioned scornfully.

"Something your Excellency would and his Highness would not care to know," Ompertz answered bluntly. "Something affecting the honour of the royal house."

The Chancellor gave in his mind a shrewd guess. "Just so," he observed indifferently. "Connected with the Princess?"

"Perhaps. I shall not say till I have your Excellency's assurance of pardon and liberty."

"H'm!" Rollmar leaned back and seemed to ponder whether it were worth while to make such a bargain. The busy, plotting brain soon had an expedient to meet the case.

"You had better speak out Captain," he said, with the suggestion of a threat.

"With pleasure against an order of release under your Excellency's hand," the undaunted Ompertz persisted.

Rollmar laughed. "You are a bold fellow."

"It is my trade," the prisoner returned simply. "As a free man I shall be happy to place my boldness at your Excellency's disposal."

The old minister gave a half-amused, half-contemptuous glance at the pertinacious mercenary. The pawn in his game might well be saved for a future sacrifice. He drew a piece of paper towards him and wrote a few lines. "There, Captain, you are a free man. I trust you have something of value to pay for your passport." He tossed the paper across the table and lay back in his chair his glittering eyes burning like symbolic lamps of craft and power.

"If I satisfy you not as to that, Excellency," Ompertz said sturdily, "I will tear up this paper and go back to my cage. I am an honest man, noble if I cared——"

"Go on, tell me. I have no time for your family history," Rollmar interrupted.

"This, then, it is, Excellency. I have said that a foolish impulse brought me back here into the net which was spread for me. I thought I might lie *perdu* in a snug place I know of, but to get there unrecognised proved not so easy as I imagined. Chut! When once a man has a price on his head there is a hue and cry ready for him at every corner. So it was that I found myself in the city unable to go forward or retreat for fear of detection. But I contrived to climb unseen into the royal park, and lay hidden there all the afternoon. Then as dusk came on I heard the baying of hounds, and suddenly be-thought me of the patrol with their dogs that I had been told made the tour of the park every evening. Here was a pretty predicament; after all my trouble, to be run down like a rat in a trench; so I came out of my lair and looked

round for a line of escape. I felt fairly certain the patrol would confine their attentions to the outer belt of the park where the covert was thickest."

"So?" The Chancellor took a mental note of the shortcoming.

"I had plenty of time," Ompertz continued, "to make a bolt to avoid them, since, from the sound, the dogs were still at a good distance off. To climb the outer wall was risky, as I might thereby slip as it were out of the rain into the gutter. The other alternative was to make for the palace buildings and lurk there till the patrol had passed, trusting to my native wit and acquired impudence to carry me through if challenged. At least I was not likely to be recognised in those high quarters.

"It would not do to run, as I might pass into view, so I walked soberly across the park, boldly, as though coming from the gate on business at the Palace. My plan appeared to succeed; I got under cover of the buildings without exciting any serious notice, and ensconced myself in the porch of the royal chapel. Scarcely, however, had I taken my stand there when I heard voices on the other side of the door. In a second I had slipped away and was behind one of the buttresses. The owners of the voices came out and went off. Then it occurred to me that while the patrol was on its rounds I might best be hidden in the chapel. I went in softly and for better security—I hope the sacrilege may be forgiven me, but reverence must give place to necessity—I crept under the altar and lay there snug and safe from observation. As soon as I judged it was safe to get back to the plantation, I was preparing to creep out, when I heard a heavy foot-step, and then, to my dismay, the locking of the door. Well, as I found myself a prisoner I resolved to make the best of the situation. A church is not, I must confess, the place I would choose to pass a night in; I prefer livelier quarters. But I am used to the fortune of war, and my billet was dry, if somewhat dusty. So I crept back under

the altar where I found some cloths, and made myself so comfortable a bed that being dog-tired, Excellency, I went off to sleep as in any four-poster.

"When I woke and had occupied some moments in realising where the devil, or rather, in the name of the saints, I was, I peeped out under the altar-cloth and saw it was night, although the moonlight enabled me to see round the place pretty clearly. I was just crawling out to stretch my limbs which were aching somewhat from the penitential hardness of the holy floor, when I became aware that I was not alone in the chapel. I am coming now, Excellency, to the kernel of my secret." Von Ompertz had by this acquired an easy confidence from the intense interest with which the fierce eyes were fastened on him.

"Go on," Rollmar said curtly.

"The shadow," he resumed, "of a human figure crossed one of the pillars, then the figure itself came into my view. A lady."

"Ah!" The exclamation was involuntary, but it told that the disclosure had been half anticipated.

"The lady," von Ompertz continued, "was the Princess."

The minister did not give the sign of surprise for which the other paused. "Go on," he commanded again.

"She came towards me, then turned off by the organ. Under the strange circumstances a little curiosity was perhaps pardonable, seeing that, lying as I was in the deep shadow, its indulgence was safe. What was the Princess doing then all alone in the dark? I crawled forward till I could see round the screen behind which she had disappeared. Then I witnessed an unexpected sight, Excellency. I am a man of honour, and not even to save my neck would I have divulged what I saw to anyone in this world but yourself."

With a slightly cynical curve of the lip, Rollmar nodded

him on. Ompertz came a step nearer and continued in a lower tone.

"The Princess was standing by an open door in the organ. From out the opening a figure appeared—a man's.

"He came from the organ?"

"Even so, Excellency; from the inside of the organ. They stayed there talking together. Unfortunately the man stood in the darkness. I could just make out his form, but not clearly enough to be able to identify his face were I to see him again. But the Princess stood where a streak of moonlight showed her face and—well, one has only two eyes, and if one had twenty the Princess would engage them all."

"Go on with the story," Rollmar said with quiet austerity.

Ompertz gave a bow of compliance. "They spoke together for some time, but in so low a tone that I could catch no word. Then I got a great start. So intent was I with observing the pair—for although I felt it was unfair, yet I dared not move back to my hiding-place—that I did not notice another lady who had entered the chapel and came now so close as almost to tread on me. Luckily she seemed in such a fluster that she did not see me. I lay still, scarcely daring to breathe.

"'Princess!' she cried. 'Come! it is time. You will be missed!'

"She moved away towards the door. And then, Excellency, I saw the Princess kiss the man. They separated on that. Her Highness hurried away, while the other lady took her companion to the door which I heard unfastened and locked again. That is all, Excellency. I had to stay there half-starved till morning, and when I got outside my hunger led to my arrest. After all, it was my duty to——"

Rollmar held up his hand with a silencing gesture. He was thinking rapidly, acutely, and what he wanted was

facts not comments. Those he could supply shrewdly enough himself.

"So you never saw the man's face?"

"No, Excellency. His face was never in the light."

"Should you recognise his voice?"

"Possibly." Ompertz felt it his cue to make himself indispensable.

For several minutes there was silence in the room. The Chancellor had motioned Ompertz to a chair, and himself sat plunged in such intense thought as, indeed, the information called for. Perhaps, had the airy swash-buckler had an idea of the part he himself was occupying in that busy cogitation he might not have sat quite so comfortably assured of his fortunes. However, expediency was on his side, and for the moment all was well with him.

The silence was oppressive, the atmosphere of the room heavy, the ticking of the great clock so monotonous that the soldier of fortune, whose night's rest had been disturbed of late, could hardly smother a yawn. But he told himself he had played his trump card at the right moment and waited but to draw his winnings.

At length the long deliberation came to an end; the expedient had been determined on, and Rollmar spoke.

"I am glad to know, Captain von Ompertz, that you are fully alive to the importance and, above all, to the delicate nature of the secret which chance has revealed to you. It is fortunate, Captain von Ompertz, that it is to a man of honour that this compromising affair has become known." Ompertz bowed, as accepting a deserved compliment.

"I say," Rollmar continued with an inauspicious light in his eyes, "it is fortunate for all parties concerned, directly and indirectly—yourself included."

The suggestion was unmistakeable, the soldier's second bow was given in less comfort than the first.

Sitting with his thin, white, cruel hands clasped before

him, the hands that had woven many a web and signed many a doom, the Chancellor resumed.

"What you saw, my good Captain, was a dangerous sight for any man to see. But I have confidence, as I say, in your honour, your chivalry," (Ompertz bowed again with rising confidence) "and I mean to trust you."

"The trust with which your Excellency is pleased to honour a poor soldier shall never be repented," was the mercenary's fervent assurance.

The Chancellor pursed his lips as though to intimate he would take care of that.

"It is," he proceeded, "obviously imperative that this discovery should be confined to the——" he unclasped the long fingers and counted on them—"the five persons who already know of it. I shall, at any rate for the present, take upon myself to keep even his Highness in ignorance. You will understand, Captain, that state as well as personal interests demand that this foolish affair must be crushed at once. It is in the highest degree unfortunate that the other party in this affair is unknown, unrecognisable. Still, that is now merely a question of a few hours. I propose to employ you, Captain, on this secret service."

"I am greatly honoured, Excellency."

"With you," Rollmar went on, ignoring the other's flourish of acknowledgements, "with you inconvenient explanations will be unneeded. You will understand. For the time being you are in my service. Here," he wrote a few words on a slip of paper, "is an order on my Comptroller for pay against any present necessities. Furbish up your wardrobe, and report yourself to me every day at noon and six o'clock. I may have instructions for you. In the meantime keep your eyes and ears open, live quietly, respectably, and, above all, remember that a hint of your secret cancels your pardon."

"Excellency," Ompertz protested in his grandest manner, "your threat does me less than justice. The honour

of the Princess is safe in my keeping; safer than if my life were as important to me as your words imply."

Rollmar gave an impatient nod of dismissal. "That is all, Captain. Report yourself at six o'clock."

Ompertz turned towards the door, then looked back. "The identity of the inhabitant of the organ, Excellency? Shall I——?"

The Chancellor waved his hand impatiently. "You may leave that to me," he interrupted grimly.

When von Ompertz was gone he struck a bell. "Mau-relli," he said to the attendant. A keen-eyed under-officer came in.

"I have given Captain von Ompertz his liberty for certain reasons," the Chancellor explained, in the quick peremptory tone of a man accustomed to handle all the various levers of the State machine. "I have a use for him. Until I give orders to the contrary let an eye be kept on him, not too closely. I do not wish the Captain to leave the city or get drunk."

"I understand, Excellency."

A motion of the hand and the Chancellor was alone to work out his strategy.

CHAPTER VIII

A SCORE AGAINST ROLLMAR

COUNTRESS MINNA VON CROY was a young lady of resource, of a ready wit and, when she was put to it, of considerable courage. But there was one person in the Court, perhaps the one person in the world, of whom she was horribly afraid. That was the Chancellor.

For the Duke—by himself, that is minus his wily old Minister—she did not care a straw. She could laugh at him as a weak, pompous figurehead, the mere stalking horse of the Chancellor, from whom he derived what terrors he possessed; a very marionette, which Rollmar's skilful fingers made to strut and posture and frown as suited the purpose of the moment. She was never tired of reflecting, when in the royal presence, what a wonderful character the late Duchess must have possessed, since the Princess was so unlike and so vastly superior to her father. Yes, the Duke she could look on with a certain careless tolerant contempt. But the Chancellor? Ah, that was another matter. Countess Minna hated and despised herself for fearing him—for she was, under the laziness bred of court life, a girl of spirit—but, fight against it as she might, she could not get over the uncomfortable feeling of trepidation and nervousness with which the presence of that astute, inscrutable old schemer always inspired her. He seemed to carry with him an environment and an atmosphere of disquietude; a quiet terrorism radiated from him; he was power incarnate, the power

of a mighty will and a resourceful brain, a quick tongue that would sting like a snake's, and a trick of speech that always seemed to carry something behind its actual words. No wonder Minna was afraid of him; her sprightly sallies, when she nerved herself to stand up to him, fell blunted against the old man's cynical condescension. He made her feel small, and that was why she so hated him and herself for her fear of him.

Just at this juncture, too, she might well have reason to regard him with an especial apprehension; consequently it was with a good deal of trepidation which defied her powers of self-command that she found herself invited to a private interview with the Chancellor, in what she was always pleased to call, the leopard's den.

He received her with stern politeness which did not allay her tremors. She was not kept in suspense as to the object of the interview; the Chancellor was notably a man to come to the point, when there was no object in delaying the arrival.

"I am sorry, Countess, to have to charge you with a breach of confidence," he began severely.

The challenge steadied Minna. "A breach of confidence, your Excellency?" she echoed in well-simulated surprise.

"An exceedingly serious one," he rejoined, "an abuse of your position as maid of honour to the Princess."

"Excellency!" she exclaimed in open-eyed astonishment. He held up his hand to check her till she should have heard him out.

"Your position as close companion to the Princess is pre-eminently a responsible one. It has come to my knowledge, Countess, that you have grossly abused it."

"Tell me how, Excellency," Minna said with compressed lips, fearing lest an unruly inflection should betray her.

"I am about to give you that superfluous information," he replied with cutting emphasis, "although it is mere

waste of time to do so. The Princess has lately formed an improper acquaintance; improper, that is, certainly so far as the nature of the acquaintanceship goes. You have abetted her in certain clandestine interviews. That is, precisely, what I mean by your abuse of the trust reposed in you."

He spoke sharply, insistently, as giving a definite explanation which could admit of no quibbling. So, somehow or other, the meeting in the chapel had been discovered. Clearly, Minna thought, denial was useless. Her half paralysed wits must be set to work to make the best of the position.

"I am not aware," she said cautiously, "that the Princess has done anything wrong or improper."

"Indeed?" Rollmar's face expressed contempt for a mental vision that could not see a thing so obvious. "You think, then, there is nothing wrong at any time, but especially now, on the eve of her betrothal to Prince Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein, in the Princess indulging in a nocturnal interview with a man in the chapel?"

"The Princess," Minna demurred, evading a direct answer and summoning her courage, "hates the idea of marrying Prince Ludwig."

"That," returned Rollmar coldly, "is a matter which I cannot discuss with you. It is entirely beside the question. What I have to say now merely touches the part you have played in this scandalous affair—and its consequences to you."

There was an ugly hint in the last words which lost nothing in their pointed emphasis. Poor Minna abruptly ceased to wonder how much her tormentor knew and how he came to know it, in apprehending her own punishment.

"I have abetted nothing scandalous," was all she could protest, and that feebly enough.

Rollmar gave a shrug. "I hold a different opinion, Countess. The affair would be disreputable enough in a

private family; in connection with a Royal house it involves not only dishonour, but treason to the State. That is unquestionable. You probably know the penalty of treason?"

The wretched Minna knew it but too well, since many a case of ministerial vengeance had come under her notice. Such dark events were not of infrequent occurrence and were bound to be common talk, since it was policy not to hush them up too closely. Already she felt herself a dead woman, or at least one for whom liberty was to be but a recollection. It was manifest to her that, from the Minister's point of view, at least, the affair was sufficiently serious to warrant the most dire measures. To do her justice, her feeling of abject despair was not confined to herself. What would be the result to her mistress of this discovery? Still, her own situation was the more perilous; she recalled a similar case in which all the possessors of a scandalous secret were removed from the face of the earth—how, could be only shudderingly conjectured.

She could but protest her innocence of all wrongful, all treasonable intention. Not a particularly cogent argument to move the stern old man, whose fierce, merciless eyes seemed to shrivel up her protests.

"Call it folly rather than treason, if you please," he retorted with his pitiless logic; "folly, culpable folly, such as yours, is treason where the State is concerned. An assignation, innocent or otherwise, is common enough, its consequences would be purely domestic in every case but one, the highest. It has been your misfortune, Countess to allow yourself to be mixed up in that one exception where the consequences might be imperial and widely disastrous."

"Yes, but, Excellency," she urged, pricked on by apprehension of what she dared not contemplate, "how could I know? How be to blame for a chance meeting?"

"A chance meeting? Really, Countess, it is best to

be straightforward with me. A chance meeting? With the Princess visiting the chapel after dark, and a man hidden in the organ?"

"Let me explain, Excellency."

"Ah! if you please." He leaned back, slowly rubbing his white hands together as though feeling carelessly the talons that were ready to strike.

"The Princess had been playing the organ that afternoon in the chapel as is her habit," Minna said, her voice dry with fear. "I was blowing the bellows for her as I always do, when this——this person came in and offered to take my place."

"Ah! Just so. And this person was——?"

"The——the man who afterwards got inside the organ, Excellency, because——"

"No doubt. I ask you who he was."

The name was on her lips; then, in the extremity of her distress, an idea, a desperate expedient flashed to her mind. She checked the answer and hesitated. Was this unfathomable old fox really ignorant of von Bertheim's identity? The forlorn chance gave her courage and sharpened her wits. She could but try.

"Come!" Rollmar insisted.

"You know his name, Excellency," she stammered.

"I ask you."

She looked at him, but the crumpled parchment of his face told her nothing. Still, in her woeful plight chance was in her favour, since she had nothing to lose. "I—I cannot tell you," she replied, "for I do not know."

The cruel eyes shot forth a light which had struck despair in many a stouter heart than this girl's; yet she was resolute to play her game through.

"If you are going to trifle with me, Countess, I shall hesitate no longer in signing the order for your arrest."

"Excellency!" she cried, trembling with a terror that was not all simulated. "I cannot tell you that. It is impossible. I will help you in every way to find out, I will

do all I can to atone for my fault, but I cannot tell you this man's name."

"You will not?"

"I cannot. It is easy for you to find out."

"Quite," he assented dryly. "Go on with your story."

"Someone came into the chapel. Fearing I had done wrong to let him remain, even to blow the organ, I opened the door and made him get in. The Princess and I went out into the Park for a few minutes and when I ran back to release him I found the chapel locked up for the night."

"So you came down and let him out after dark?" Rollmar suggested with an incredulous smile.

"Yes, Excellency. I could not let him stay there all night."

"It would have been too bad, certainly. I am waiting to hear, Countess, why it was necessary for the Princess to accompany you on this errand of relief."

"The Princess was distressed at the idea of the poor fellow being boxed up in the organ."

"So distressed that she was obliged to kiss him on his release?"

Minna threw up her hands in horror. She was beginning to feel at home in her part now. "Kiss! Excellency, you have been grossly misinformed. Someone has been maligning the Princess to you. It is abominable!"

"It is," he agreed with a grim smile. "So there was no kiss, eh?"

"Most assuredly not. My dear Princess kiss a man like that! You don't know her, Excellency."

He gave a shrug and a look which suggested that if he could not read the Princess he was at least able to decipher her maid of honour without trouble. "We shall see, my Countess," he observed significantly. "And let me tell you at once that you are very foolish if you think to hoodwink me. Now, take care. Do I understand

you to suggest that the Princess is engaged in no love affair?"

"A love affair? Perhaps. With the love on one side and that not the Princess's. And a kiss! It is preposterous. I take upon myself to deny the kiss."

"Never mind the kiss." Rollmar softened his expression into one of vulpine humour, and continued almost pleasantly, "I fancy you know more than you choose to tell, Countess. Never mind"—he silenced her protest with a gesture—"it makes but the difference of an hour or two. Now, your one chance of escape from the consequences of your—indiscretion is to make amends by giving me assistance in this affair."

This proposal had been precisely what Minna had been aiming at for the furtherance of her delusive expedient, but she was careful not to show eagerness. Her courage rose with the realisation that at last she had a chance of measuring her wits successfully against her cunning old bugbear.

"But the Princess?" she objected with the suggestion of a scruple. "You ask me to do her an ill turn."

"On the contrary," was the natural retort. "I employ you to do her a good turn, to be loyal to her best interests. You will not help the affair by refusing, while it is obviously desirable that the secret should be confined to ourselves. Still," he gave one of his ominous shrugs—"you are at liberty to refuse, but I am afraid it is the only liberty you can count on."

The threat appeared to decide her. After a moment's hesitation she said: "Your Excellency wishes to discover the man who courts the Princess?" He nodded. "Then if I may be so bold as to suggest a plan you might make an unexpected visit to the Royal Chapel at about five o'clock to-day, in the meantime giving no hint of your suspicions to any one."

He looked at her keenly, and under those searching

eyes it was all she could do to keep an expression of ingenuousness.

"Very well," he said curtly, rising to end the interview. "I need hardly warn you, Countess, not to attempt to deceive me."

"I could not hope to do so, Excellency, even if I wished," she replied humbly. "And you will soon see that I have no wish."

He held open the door, and she passed out, hiding with one of her demurest looks the exultant relief at her heart.

That afternoon, close upon the appointed hour, the Chancellor came quietly into the Royal Chapel—not so quietly, however, but that Minna, cunningly on the watch, detected the first signal of his arrival.

There was hurried whispering, a scramble and a hiding away, with a momentary giving out of the wind supply in the organ. The Chancellor came in quiet, fox-like and confident, ostensibly listening to the music, but having eyes for every movement round him. He stood by the screen overlooking the player till the Princess turned and saw him.

"Ah, Baron!" she said, with some show of posture, "how you startled me."

"Do not let me interrupt you, Princess," he protested grimly.

"Oh, I have finished playing," and she left the keyboard. "I did not know you cared for music, Baron."

"I was a player in my youth," he replied readily, "before the business of state-craft left me no time for the pleasures of mere sound. Ah," he went on blandly, "this old organ has a history; it would be a pity to have it removed. I came in to examine it."

"The organ, Baron?" the Princess exclaimed incredulously and, it seemed to him, with trepidation, making allowance for her power of self-control.

"This organ," he repeated. "There is a question of replacing it."

"You are going to try it, Baron," the Princess laughed, making way for him to reach the player's seat.

"My fingers have long ago lost their cunning," he returned with a gesture of protest, and a half veiled look which suggested that their cunning had migrated to another part of his anatomy. "But at least I know something of instruments and will look at this."

He affected to make a cursory examination of the manuals, the stops and pedals, counted the pipes, and so worked round to the door giving access to the interior. A look of intelligence had passed between him and Minna, and he felt confident that he had trapped his prey. "Now let me take a look inside," he said casually.

"You, Excellency? It is impossible," Minna affected to protest. "It is frightfully dusty, no one but a mechanic can go inside."

But he waved her aside with a smile at her objection.

Then the Princess gave a forced laugh.

"Really, Baron, apart from the dust it is hardly dignified for our Chancellor to creep into the inside of the organ. You really will consult your dignity by delegating that inspection to the mechanic."

He turned and eyed her uncompromisingly. "If I have served your father well, Princess, it is because I have made a rule to look with my own eyes into everything that concerned his welfare and that of the State."

"But, surely the organ, Baron——?"

"May include a question of greater importance and delicacy than one would suppose," he rejoined significantly. "Therefore, in pursuance of my rule I am going to look inside."

There was clearly no more protest to be made in view of that stern resolve. Minna stood aside with anxiety on her face. The Baron turned the latch and pulled

open the narrow door. The sharp eyes instantly detected a pair of legs in military boots, the upper part of the owner's body being hidden behind the heavy framework.

The Chancellor turned round to the Princess with a triumphant glitter in his eyes. "What did I tell you, Princess? You see the wisdom of my rule. And how unwise it would have been to have delegated this examination. The organ does contain superfluous matter which I am better fitted than a mechanic to remove. No wonder, Princess, the instrument is liable to be out of order. I think we must have one built for you in your private apartments where your playing will be less open to be interfered with. Now, sir," he changed to a loud peremptory tone—"have the goodness to come out at once!"

He stepped back from the door. The man inside, thus summoned, was heard moving. The Baron put a silver whistle to his lips, and, as it sounded, Captain von Ompertz, alert and business-like, entered the chapel by the outer door. As he did so the hider in the organ appeared and sprang down to the floor. At sight of him the expression on the Baron's face changed from malicious anticipation to chagrined astonishment, as on those of the Princess and Minna pretended anxiety gave way to amused triumph. For the man who stood before him, whom he was there to arrest and send off to secret execution, was his own son, Udo Rollmar.

CHAPTER IX

A FALSE POSITION

CHANCELLOR ROLLMAR had that night much food for cogitation and scheming. That he had been shrewdly tricked was an idea which an interview with his son did not dispel. Udo was sulky and inclined to be defiant. He did not see why he might not be a sufficiently suitable match for the Princess. The notion was attractive enough to the Baron's ambition, but his knowledge of the world and politics told him that it was practically out of the question, and he said so.

"I do not see it, father," Udo protested in an aggrieved tone. "You are to all intents Duke here, since you are universally acknowledged as the Duke's master. Where, then, is the inequality?"

But the astute old Minister's answer was ready. "You forget, my dear Udo, that royalty and intellect are two vastly different things. They are, and must ever be, unequal. They are as the owner and the captain of a ship. The captain is in trusted command, yet not one inch of rope or stitch of canvas belongs to him."

"The captain's son may aspire to the owner's daughter," Udo argued.

"Not on an equality," his father rejoined; "moreover, and by the articles of the ship of state, such contingencies are interdicted. No, Udo, it is a magnificent idea and as manifestly impracticable. You will do well to put it from your mind."

"Even if the Princess herself be willing?"

The Baron had shrewd doubts of that. "It seems to me that this is more an affair of the maid than the mistress."

Udo flushed. His father's suggestion found unpleasant corroboration in the fact that it had indeed been Minna who had invited him that afternoon to the chapel. The Baron took sagacious note of his silence. He was, perhaps, notwithstanding, a little disappointed at the token that he had hit the mark so nearly, for although its growth may be stunted yet ambition is a plant that will spring up and force its way, refusing to be choked and withered by the sturdier bushes of discretion and sagacity with which time besets it.

"Have you any reason to think that the Princess is in love with you?" he asked bluntly.

"Hardly that yet," Udo was fain to answer, laughing a little awkwardly under his father's searching gaze.

"The Princess dislikes the idea of this projected marriage with Prince Ludwig. She is likely to be rebellious. You must not let her in any reckless spirit make a fool of you."

The words carried more sting than the speaker intended. "It is you," Udo returned sneeringly, "who have set your heart on this marriage. I cannot expect you, where affairs of state are involved, to care even for your son's happiness."

"You cannot expect me to foster your foolish hopes," old Rollmar retorted.

"I have a rival provided and backed up by my father," Udo declared hotly.

The Baron gave a shrug. "You talk nonsense."

But the young man was not in a state of mind to see the weak point of his grievance. "It is unfortunate for you," he continued viciously, "that this husband you have provided does not come to your bidding. Is it not time you produced him?"

The Baron smiled indulgently. Perhaps he could make allowances for a son to whom he had transmitted the whole of his malignity and but a modicum of his cleverness. "You will allow me to know best," he said quietly, "how to conduct the affairs of this duchy. Prince Ludwig will be here soon enough, and were he not to come at all it would hardly open the door to your pretensions. Did I think there was a chance of it I should hardly overlook you in the matter."

But the young man was still ruffled. "A chance! You seem to take care, my good father, that I shall not have a chance, with your ill-timed descent upon our meeting-place——"

"I looked to find any one but you, my dear Udo."

"And yet you think you know everything."

The Baron was content to reflect that there was not much that escaped him, and this trifling ignorance was temporary. "I heard," he said, "that the Princess was in the habit of meeting a man in the chapel, but the identity of the lover was, possibly from motives of delicacy, withheld from me. It was my business to discover who was hidden in the organ."

"May I ask how you came to suspect my hiding-place?"

"I heard of your being shut up in the organ the previous night."

"What?" Udo was surprised out of his sullen humour. "I shut up in the organ? Never in my life till to-day."

The suspicion in his father's mind that he had been deluded became a certainty. "So," he exclaimed, without betraying the slightest discomfiture, "then if you speak the truth, my dear Udo, we have both been prettily tricked."

Udo's face grew darker. "How tricked?"

The Baron shrugged. "Our Princess has a lover, and you, my boy, are not he."

"Who is he?" Udo demanded with vicious eagerness.

"Ah, that is what I must know, shall know in a few hours," his father replied grimly. "He will not enjoy your immunity."

"I hope not," Udo observed amiably.

"I have a blood-hound on his track. You may trust me to run him to earth. When a woman stoops to trickery she is more than a match for the cleverest man; her strength lies in her weakness—and in his."

Which saying was not exactly a soothing balm for Captain Udo's smarting vanity.

So the Chancellor had been outwitted for the nonce; he was, however, far too diplomatic to let the Princess or Minna see that he was aware of it, or to show the slightest spleen. On the contrary, he took an opportunity when they met at a royal dinner-party that evening of mildly bantering the Princess on her supposed predilection for his son. "It is scarcely a fair game to play with my poor boy, Highness," he said half ruefully, "to lead him on to dream of the unattainable."

"Was it my fault, Baron?" she returned. "And for that matter, is it not yourself who insist on placing me above everybody's reach—save one?"

"Do not blame the steward for keeping guard over his master's treasure," Rollmar rejoined.

"Burying the talent, Baron."

"Nay, keeping it for the man who can put it to the best use, not allowing it to be frittered away and wasted."

"And in the meantime we are beggars since our fortune is locked up and unnegotiable. Really, Baron, your plan may be sound policy, but it has its disadvantages. To go no farther, you have deprived me of a willing organ-blower."

"I shall be happy to replace him by a less aspiring one," he returned with a smile; "whose position will

not warrant his exploring the interior of the organ when the music is interrupted."

She gave a petulant shrug. "I see poor Minna will have to resume her work at the bellows. Perhaps it is best. I presume you have told Captain Rollmar that his services are dispensed with?"

"I have told my son that wind is apt to fan a spark into a dangerous flame."

"You hear, Minna?" the Princess said to her friend who was near. "You are not in future to call young men to your assistance when I play the organ. The wind blown by a man is nothing but the breath of scandal, and our dear Baron is going to have a lock put on the door lest the works should be tampered with by our cavaliers taking sudden refuge inside."

Meanwhile Captain von Ompertz had received instructions to keep a close watch on the chapel and the park, and especially to note all the less conventional goings and comings of the Princess and her maid. Notwithstanding this, however, Minna had, before the order had been given, found an opportunity of warning Ludovic to keep away from the palace. Had it not been for this it is likely that the Chancellor's desired prey might, after all, have fallen into his hands that afternoon. As it was, Ludovic, though troubled and impatient, kept safely away. The message, however, was not entirely one of despair, for Minna had, on her own responsibility, added a few words to the effect that should the Princess or she think proper to write, the missive would be placed under the slab of a ruined sun-dial which stood in a remote nook of the royal park. Nearer to the palace than that point he was warned not to approach unless especially bidden. That, at any rate, was something to feed his hopes upon, and he lived in happy anticipation of what, perhaps, the next of his morning and evening visits to the old sun-dial might have in store for him.

Von Ompertz did his best to deserve his patron's con-

fidence, although this detective work was not exactly what he had been used to, or indeed congenial to him. Still he was a soldier of fortune, literally and figuratively, and ready to take any official work that came in his way. The pay was good, the prospects, at least as he fancied, still better; and, after all, he was serving the state, and to hire his services and his fealty to one state or another was his vocation. Yes, he told himself, he was lucky to have come so well out of a hanging matter, and must not grumble if the work which had practically earned his release was not quite such as he would have chosen. So he paraded the park, keeping a wary eye on the chapel and the private entrances to the palace, with his beloved sword, now happily restored to him, loose in its scabbard, and when the first distasteful idea had been dulled he found himself as eager to earn his pay by catching the Princess's lover as though he were but a bravo or secret agent, and not the man of such honour as he had through a mettlesome career always striven to maintain.

His sentinel work did not, however, long remain unnoted by Countess Minna's sharp eyes. He was, of course, easily recognized as the man whom Baron Rollmar had summoned to his aid in the chapel. Consequently the reason of his patrol was not far to seek. Whenever Minna took a stroll across the park she found herself followed by the swaggering Captain, now gallant in his dress, his better case throwing up a certain distinction in his appearance which his former rough, unkempt attire had all but effaced. It was like the restoration of an old picture; the traits of a certain nobility came out through the film gathered by years of rough usage and neglect.

But the espionage was intolerable. Minna turned upon her follower and demanded in high indignation what it meant. The Captain, taken by surprise, was gallantly deferential and apologetic. He had no idea of annoying the honoured Countess or of forcing himself upon her

notice. But strange men, presumably bad characters, had been seen loitering about the royal precincts and it was his duty to keep watch and account for them.

"It is, I presume," Minna said resentfully, "no part of your duty to follow me?"

Only as a protection and that at a most respectful distance, he assured her. It was, he ventured to point out, the honoured Countess who had accosted him, not he the noble Countess.

Minna was a pretty girl, and there was a certain wistful admiration in the Captain's eyes as he uttered the somewhat disingenuous explanation.

"When I require your escort, your protection," she retorted, quite unsoftened by his hyper-courteous manner, "I will ask for it."

"When you require it, gracious Countess, it will probably be too late," he rejoined. "My orders are——"

"To force your services upon the ladies of the household who walk in the park," she exclaimed indignantly. "Perhaps when you understand that they are uncalled-for and distasteful you will see the desirability of a not too strict obedience to your precious orders; that is, if a soldier can understand anything beyond the word of command."

If the taunt stung him his low bow hid its effect. "The noble Countess will pardon me, but the humble soldier who has been so unlucky as to offend her has also some pretensions to nobility. The soldier's trade is killing; but I hope my profession has not killed the chivalry in the last of a noble Austrian race."

He spoke with a certain dignity and a marked softening of the bluff manner which a rough life had given him. But Minna was in no mood to be interested in one whom she looked upon merely as a creature of her arch-enemy, the Chancellor.

"You can easily prove your pretension," she returned coldly, "by ceasing to molest me. I am quite able to

take care of myself, and to be followed about the park is hateful."

Without waiting for further parley, she turned abruptly and walked off, leaving him to gaze after her with a discomfited look on his face.

"A plaguey business this of mine," he muttered. "I must either neglect my duty or my manners. After all, Albrecht von Ompertz is a gentleman; it goes against the grain to play the spy. And on a sweet pretty girl, too, though, by the lightning, something of a spit-fire. Ah, there was a time when a girl of her sort would not have spoken like that to me. Pfui! Can I blame her if she took me for—what I am, what I have made myself? Bah! Let me get on with it. Duty before everything; even at the risk of offending a proud little pair of bright eyes."

With something like a sigh he took up the burden of a false position and strolled off watchfully in the direction Minna had gone.

CHAPTER X

BY THE MIRROR LAKE

THE encounter between Countess Minna and von Ompertz had the effect of making both watcher and watched more circumspect.

The Captain ceased to perambulate the royal precincts so openly; while Minna's daylight walks were of the most patently innocent kind. So far she played her game shrewdly enough; but it was certainly a dangerous, if not a false move, when she determined on an expedition after dusk to the old sun-dial. The spirit of rebellion had entered strongly into the Princess, and was fanned by her companion from motives of pure roguery as well as for revenge for the fright which the Chancellor had given her. It was to the Princess Ruperta intolerable that her whole life and happiness should be dominated by this cunning old minister, and to be subjected to a system of close espionage was more than her spirit would endure. If the Duke, her father, was weak enough to submit, she would not be so tame: she would let Rollmar see that she was no pawn to be pushed about according to the exigencies of his political game. She wished as dearly as he that the laggard Prince would make his appearance; she would give him an uncomfortable time of it, and delight in upsetting the Chancellor's plans.

"He is wise to keep away in hiding," she said resentfully to Minna, "but, for all that, I should love to hear

that he had arrived. The Baron should have many a *mauvais quart d'heure*, I promise you."

"It would be rare fun," Minna assented. "How I should enjoy watching the old fox's face while you were mortifying the vanity of this precious Prince Ludwig. You will surely have a fair field there, dear Highness, for were he not eaten up by self-conceit he would have been here long ago."

"He has never shown the least sign of interest." The Princess made a quick gesture of anger. "And I am to marry the pig. I hate him; I hate him, as you shall see, my dear Baron."

Meanwhile her precious freedom should not be circumscribed. Her feelings should not be coerced. If this hateful marriage, after a stormy wooing, had to take place it was at least hardly to be expected that she should calmly wait, keeping her fancy free, for this very cavalier wooer. The Princess was, as has been seen, a woman of great determination, who could be as cold as ice, nay, colder, for she had the power of remaining at freezing point under the fiercest sun. Still, after all—and no one knew this more shrewdly than did the Baron—she was a woman; her force of passion was none the less strong because it was deeply set. To such a nature her very bringing up had made for waywardness, power in a woman implies caprice, and caprice is none the less absolute because the power is bounded. The road to such a woman's heart is not direct. They who take the straight path shall find it but leads them to a blank wall, or at least to a fast-barred door. The heart is set, as it were, in the centre of a maze, you may chance upon it by taking a path which seems to lead away from your objective. There is a cunning side inlet; a short, unexpected turn, and lo! the goal is before you.

It was thus with Ludovic von Bertheim. He had caught the Princess's interest by surprise at the fortune-teller's; the glamour of a strange adventure was over

his personality, the glimpses she had caught of his character, so different from that shown by the young bloods she was used to see about the Court, had captured her fancy, then her heart, which, despite her reputation for coldness, was hungering for love. And love had seemed so far off, so little to be hoped for now that she was to be hand-fast to a man whom she had never seen, and who seemed bent on showing that he must not be expected to play the lover. Small wonder then if, under the stress of a joyless future and wounded sensibility, she forgot her pride of station and allowed herself to think tenderly of a man who had so suddenly and curiously come into her life. Now, more than ever, did she resent with all the spirit that was in her the manifest way in which she was being used by Rollmar to further his schemes of aggrandisement. That he should wish her to form an alliance of high political importance she could understand; it was, from a statesman's point of view, reasonable enough; but that he should take upon himself to play the spy on her, to interfere with her personal liberty, was more than she would brook. It was monstrous, and, with a girl of her high spirit, was simply pressing the key which would give forth the note of rebellion.

"It is dangerous, though, Minna," she said.

"Surely, Highness, you are not beginning to fear that old fox."

"Not I," she replied scornfully, "I meant for him, for the Lieutenant."

Minna gave a shrug. "Possibly. We may tell him the risk he runs. I wager if we appoint a meeting he will not stay away for fear of our dear Baron; and if he should, why, let him stay away for ever."

"He will not stay away," the Princess asserted. "But if we should lead him into a trap, Minna, it would be terrible. The Chancellor is relentless."

"At least we are not fools," Minna declared. "I have

outwitted the old tiger-cat once ; trust me, dear Highness, not only to do it again, but to deal with that stupid swaggering fellow of his, a great fool who calls himself noble and proves it—by playing the spy."

So presently Minna was allowed to write a short message, and after dark she slipped out to take it across the park to the appointed post-office. But all her wariness did not hide her from the sharp eyes that were on the watch. The stupid swaggering fellow she chose to despise was an old campaigner ; one whose life had too often depended on alertness of eye and ear to be caught napping. Neither was he the fool she was pleased to call him. He had sense enough to guess shrewdly that her daylight walks were a blind, and to expect her appearance on a more purposeful errand in the evening.

If it went against the grain to spy upon a woman, Ompertz gathered some satisfaction from the thought that the disdainful little maid of honour evidently despised him, which sentiment she was by no means given to conceal wherever they chanced to meet. Now, perhaps it was to be his turn, he thought, as he followed the dark, retreating figure that hurried along the great avenue of elms. Von Ompertz was an expert stalker, his trained eye could see in the dark almost as clearly as a cat's, he had little difficulty in keeping her within observation and himself out of it. She gave him a long chase, but he stuck to it successfully, and was, after much wonderment, rewarded by seeing the note posted beneath the loose slab of the sun-dial.

In half an hour the missive was in the hands of the Chancellor ; its purport was noted, and it was restored to its place.

Rollmar was highly pleased at the near prospect of putting an end to what might prove a tiresome impediment to his scheme. He commended Ompertz, and with him concerted a plan of action for the next night for which the assignation was given. The soldier was quite willing

to undertake the business single-handed, but at that suggestion the Chancellor shook his head. It was too risky, the thing was to be carried out swiftly, surely, noiselessly. Ompertz would be provided with two assistants; he was to be in command, and the Chancellor's future favour depended upon the way in which the business would be performed.

The lovers' place of meeting was to be by the temple on the lake in the park. A romantic spot where the trees grew down to the water's edge, and arched over till their branches swept the surface. It was a favourite place for summer picnics and fishing parties. The lake was of great depth; being formed in a chalk basin the water was singularly clear, and reflected in almost startling intensity the high wall of foliage which surrounded it.

It was on the outer fringe of this belt of woodland that Ludovic kept watch next evening for the coming of the Princess, and as the two cloaked figures showed themselves against a vista of moonlit sky he, with a delicious sense of anticipation, hurried forward to meet them. After the greeting, Minna dropped behind as the others walked on towards the lake.

"Ah, Princess," Ludovic said, "how desperately I have longed, and how gloriously I have been rewarded."

"I ought not to have come," she replied. "It is a great risk, especially for you. Baron Rollmar is suspicious, impertinently suspicious."

Behind her quiet tone there was the vibration of restrained indignation, of a sharp resentment. He joyed to realise that she talked quite freely to him now; the impulsive act of their last meeting had swept away the barrier of reserve which had stood between them.

"The worthy Chancellor," he said, "has plans for your future."

"In which I am not consulted."

"Is that the reason you resent them?"

"Could I have a better? So even you have heard of Rollmar's plans?"

"Even I, Princess. Vaguely. You are to marry Prince Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein."

"According to the Chancellor's predetermination."

"And you are not inclined to fall in with his views?"

Her face was set firmly as she answered, "I am not."

"For no other reason than that you are not a free agent?"

Was it because he was catechising her with too much freedom that she turned on him and replied sharply?

"For several other reasons."

"Dare I ask for one?"

She gave him a curious glance, surprised, perhaps, at his persistent questioning. "I will give you one, an all-sufficient reason. I hate Prince Ludwig."

"You might not if you knew him."

"I could not do otherwise. I hate him, I hate him!"

Her vehemence seemed to surprise him. "It is a rash declaration to make," he said. "I venture to think, Princess, that if you saw him you might after all recant."

She shook her head impatiently. "Never. Nothing could ever make me like that man; not even were he to turn out the most charming fellow in the world. Ah, of course, he is your Prince, your future King, you are too loyal to hear a word said against him, even from a woman whom he has treated, to say the least, with disrespect."

"If he has done that, my Princess——"

"If? He has. But I will not stoop to complain. Happily his conduct suits my purpose, and for the rest my pride can take care of itself. Your Prince has a right to your loyalty, he is nothing to me but a disagreeable shadow, a mere name that offends me. Let us talk of him no more."

They had now passed through the belt of wood and arrived at the margin of the lake. It lay before them

like a strip of mirror framed in the dark sides over which the shadows reached. At a short distance along the margin stood a small building, an imitation of a classical temple, its cupola on which the moonlight fell, looking like a white ball suspended in the air, since the lower part of the structure was in shadow. From this a short platform or landing-stage extended over the water and terminated in a boat-house. It was towards this temple, their appointed trysting-place, that the Princess and her companion strolled, Minna following them at a discreet interval.

"It makes me sad, my Princess," he said, "to think that you are not happy, when I am powerless to prevent it. I who would give my life to spare you an hour's unhappiness. If our paths lay together; as it is they seem to cross only to run wide apart."

She did not reply at once. "Who can tell?" she said, after they had taken some steps in silence, "what the future may hold for——" she hesitated—"for me? Happily no one, not even our Chancellor! and so there is just a little space for hope to squeeze itself in, although they would try to deny that to one whose birth puts her above the joys of ordinary humanity."

The same note of bitterness which she had struck that night when they talked on the terrace sounded again. It was evidently becoming the dominant tone in her life's music.

"Princess," Ludovic said, "I cannot bear to hear you talk like that. And yet how can I dare——?"

She interrupted him with a little laugh, putting out her hand and just touching his arm for an instant. "Come, my friend," she said lightly, "you shall have no more of my doleful grievances. We did not meet to waste our time in grumbling at a fate which, after all, may not be as bad as it looks. I love to hear of the world outside our dull court walls, to come in touch with a life

which is free and unrestrained by the hateful officialdom in which my lot is cast. Tell me of yourself."

They had reached the temple. The Princess sat down on a bench by the pillared entrance and signed to him to sit beside her.

"Tell me of yourself."

"I fear," he said, "that my history is uneventful enough. It is but that of a young soldier who is now on furlough and travelling for pleasure. My life's real history starts at a point whence it is as well known to you as to me. And you can continue it as well, or better, than I."

She comprehended his meaning and looked down. He spoke earnestly, yet with a chivalrous reticence which she appreciated. For some moments there was silence between them. The murmur of the woodland, just rustled by a slight breeze, was pierced by the cry of a night-jar. It came like a note of ill omen, although to the lovers the tranquil delight of the situation was too absorbing to allow them to be altogether conscious of their surroundings.

"I?" She laughed with wistful eyes fixed on the black wall of trees in front of them. "I can tell nothing. You know I am mistress not even of my own actions, although a duke's daughter."

His voice, as he replied, was very low, coming to her ear only just above the murmur of the wood. "You are mistress of one thing, Princess." He paused, watching her anxiously for a sign of offence or encouragement. None came. "Of me—of my heart," he ventured.

"And my own—that is all," she said softly.

"That is all the world to us." He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. He was on his knees before her. "Princess! My love! Ruperta! My love!" he murmured.

She seemed to check an impulse and turned her head away. "It is madness!"

"Then let me never be sane," he whispered in rapture. "Princess, give me one word, one word in which you shall write my life's history—that I am beloved by you."

The hand he clasped was cold, the face which glorified his gaze was set as that of a beautiful statue. Only the breath which, coming quickly, made manifest that the cold face was but the flag of one of the belligerents within her. "It is not fair." The words came from her dreamily from excess of repression.

"Fair?" he echoed passionately. "How can it be unfair to either of us? When I would die gladly in the sound of that word from your lips, die before a fleck of scandal could touch you."

"I believe that," she replied. "I am sure that you are the very soul of honour, but——"

"Ah, let there be no 'but,' my love, my sweet Princess."

"You are asking me to speak a word which both of us know well I have no right to utter."

"From your head, perhaps; but from your heart?" he pleaded.

She still gently shook her head. "No, no, my dear friend. You must be content with the signs I have already given you."

"Princess, ah, dear love, I beseech you."

"No, no."

"Give me at least the sign again."

"The sign?"

"A kiss."

The hot breath of the word touched her cheek, which seemed to glow and catch fire from its ardency. "No, no!" she cried desperately. "You are unkind; I—I was mad; I knew not what I did. You must forget——"

"Never! never!"

Her coldness, her innate imperiousness had vanished. She was no longer the Princess, but a woman striving with the temptation of a passion, which was snapping one by one the bands which had so long confined it. She

had for one moment given it working room, and now she was reeling fainting in its grasp. With an intense, supreme effort she put out her arms and thrust him from her. He caught her wrists in his hands and held hers to his lips. So they stayed looking into each other's eyes; he had but to spread out his arms to bring their faces together.

"Go!" she panted, "go! I—this is—ah, will you not respect me and let me go; yes, and end this madness?"

His lips scarcely moved as he answered tensely: "Yes, Princess, I will go if you bid me."

"I bid you go." An effort alone kept the words steady.

He lowered her hands, but still kept them in his own. "I have offended you?"

"You will if you do not obey me." She was steadying herself now after the blind struggle. The rapture was thrust away; a few moments more, could she but keep command of herself, and she would be again the Princess as the world knew her.

Ludovic let her hands fall free. "At least, Princess," he said with an effort, "you shall not say I do not respect you."

"It is best," she replied simply; and he longed to detect a sign of regret in her voice.

Like the sound that startles us from a dream came Minna's voice in a terrified undertone as she rushed into the porch.

"Highness! we are discovered! We are lost! There are men coming. Look!"

A glance showed them figures but a few yards away advancing quickly from the deep shadows of the trees. In an instant Ludovic had sprung to the door. It was unlocked. With a deep exclamation of relief, he slipped through into the circular room to which it gave access. As he turned to fasten the door behind him he found

that the Princess had followed. "Go back," he cried in consternation, "or you are ruined. Trust me——"

The door was closed now, and they were in the room together. Already could be heard the sound of a man's voice and Minna's replying to it. Ludovic shot the bolt of the door, then ran across to that on the opposite side which gave upon the lake. It was fastened.

"Princess!" he exclaimed in agony. "I have disgraced you, but ——"

She was at his side, her face white with terror. "It is I who am to blame," she said in an agitated whisper. "They will kill you. They are the Chancellor's men, I know. They will kill you. Ah, they shall kill me too."

The streak of moonlight which fell through the window showed more than terror in her face. It was love. For an instant he held her in his arms. "Darling," he whispered, strangely calm, "have no fear." Their lips met in a burning kiss, then again she pressed hers to his, as though clinging to the last touch of joy the world would give her. There was a loud knocking at the door. He gently put her from him, and with unaccountable deliberation went towards it. She caught his arm. "They will kill you without mercy or hesitation," she said.

He turned. "Would it not be better," he whispered, "for Prince Ludwig?"

She started back as though the name had been a blow to strike her. "To save me from him, let them not take you," she entreated. "Let us not part with that hated name between us."

He seemed to change his intention, as he ran to the window and opened it. "Farewell, my love," he said, turning towards her.

Her arms were round his neck. "Good-bye, my darling. Oh, my love, my love! That I could die with you."

As their lips parted he turned and dropped lightly from the window to the landing-stage beneath. Rigid with a

despair too poignant for tears, she stood and watched him, never heeding the knocking and rattling at the door. She saw him creep out along the pier that bridged the platform and the boat-house, the shelter of which he gained just as the door of the temple was sent flying open and two men stumbled into the room.

In a moment they comprehended how their man had escaped.

"The window," Ompertz commanded hastily. "Pardon this violence, Highness," he added with a bow to the Princess, who stood before him motionless, impassive as a statue, "but we are after a fellow who haunts this place and may offer to molest your Highness."

Her face did not change as with dry lips she said quietly, "He is not here."

Meanwhile the other man had got out of the window and been joined from outside by a third. "To the boat-house, idiots!" cried Ompertz, hastening to the window. Minna came in and sank down trembling and hysterical by her mistress. The men ran along the gangway and disappeared into the boat-house. Ompertz, waiting by the window, half turned and began another apology to the Princess. With a touch of her wonted imperiousness she cut him short, forbidding him to address her. One of the men came back along the pier.

"Well?" Ompertz demanded. "Have you caught him?"

"He is not there, Captain," the fellow answered, at a loss. "The place is empty."

Ompertz swore an oath between his teeth. A shot rang out from the boat-house. The two men leaned forward, peering anxiously across the shadow-streaked water. They were too intent to hear a gasping sigh as Princess Ruperta sank down by Minna's side in a swoon.

CHAPTER XI

UDO SEES

WITHIN the hour Ompertz was standing before his employer.

"Well?" Rollmar demanded sharply, as he read the soldier's face. "You have failed?"

"I dare not say we have, Excellency," he answered, determined to make the best of the business. "I should not like to swear that our man is not lying at the bottom of the lake with a bullet through him."

In Rollmar's searching eyes there was a gleam of savage satisfaction. "So? But there is a doubt about it, eh?"

"We lost the fellow in the darkness," Ompertz explained. "But that he went into the lake is certain, and almost so that he never came out again. The water of the Mirror Pool is deadly cold, Excellency: he would need all his hot blood——"

The Chancellor stopped him by an impatient gesture. "I want facts, not theories, from a soldier. And the fact is you have bungled."

"More likely that we have saved your Excellency the trouble of a private execution," Ompertz rejoined sturdily. "Pesqui swears he hit him."

The Chancellor's contemptuous exclamation showed that he did not accept that worthy's view of the matter. "What of the Princess?" he demanded.

"The Princess thought so too," the soldier replied

imperturbably, "for she fell into a swoon. It was that which kept me from going to see whether her lover had been accounted for."

"And in the meantime he got clear away," Rollmar said in a sharp tone of annoyance. "What did the two fools that were with you?"

Ompertz gave a shrug. "They hurried round the bank, one on each side, and searched thoroughly."

"When it was too late."

The Captain seemed, even in that presence, on the verge of losing his temper. "What could they do, Excellency? They are Italian cats: they cannot swim in icy water. The Princess's condition demanded my attention. I deny that we have failed, or, at least, that we have bungled."

"We shall see," Rollmar said curtly, and dismissed him.

Very early next morning a boat floated out on the lake with two men in it, the Chancellor and Captain von Ompertz. The glassy water gave back the two faces which peered over the gunwale, as different as two physiognomies could well be: one with sharp, cruel, saturnine features, and a skin like creased parchment; the other full, ruddy, weather-beaten, its pleasant jovial expression just held in check by the grim business of the moment. The eyes of both men were keenly scanning the bottom of the lake, clearly visible through several fathoms of water; but the object they sought nowhere met their scrutiny. Over every foot of water which could possibly have been the theatre of the hoped-for tragedy the boat glided; to and fro, turning and backing and zig-zagging, with the keen, ruthless face bent over the bow like a devilish figure-head, its malignant eyes eager for the sight of a grey face staring up from the white floor beneath them. Rollmar's anxiety was proved by the patient care with which every place, likely and unlikely, was examined; but all without result. At length he broke sharply what

to his companion had been an uncomfortable silence.

"Row back to the boat-house. It is as I thought. You have bungled."

The accusation could not, judged by the result, be very well denied, but the free-lance was not the man to let judgment go by default.

"From no lack of zeal, Excellency," he protested as he set himself to the sculls.

"Zeal!" There was an infinity of contempt and annoyance in the word. "Better lack zeal than sense."

Captain von Ompertz looked redder than the exertion of rowing would account for. "I do not see, Excellency," he argued sturdily, "where we failed in sense."

He was failing therein now, for wisdom will not argue with a disappointed, angry man.

"Then I will tell you," Rollmar returned, as though not unwilling to have vent for his spleen. "The man you sought was in that building; there were three of you, and you let him escape. All the wit shown in the business he may fairly claim. You should have sent one of your men round and cut off his escape on this side."

"That I did, Excellency. I sent Forli round," Ompertz assured him promptly. "It was hardly my fault that in creeping along the narrow parapet he slipped and fell into the water, thereby losing time."

The boat touched the landing-stage. Without troubling to continue the discussion, Rollmar stepped ashore and walked off quickly, followed by the discountenanced but still jaunty Captain.

On reaching home Rollmar sent for his son. "Udo," he said, "you see much of the Court doings. I must find out who the man is for whom the Princess has taken this foolish fancy. Have you any idea?"

The young man threw himself on a couch with a moody head-shake.

"I have seen nothing of it, father. She always
cold and distant to every one alike."

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"And yet there is a—lover."

Udo winced. The idea stung him as with the flick of a whip.

"You are sure of that?" he asked, hoping for a doubt.

"Quite. I nearly had the fellow caught last night."

"And you have no idea who he is?" Udo asked incredulously.

The Baron shook his head. "None. The fact is not flattering to our system, but this, you see, is an affair which must be handled with the greatest delicacy and secrecy. Should a breath of scandal reach Beroldstein, our hopes in that quarter would be annihilated. Now, keep your eyes open, my dear boy; I must find out who the man is. The affair must be stopped at once. He shall not escape me again."

Udo nodded and rose. His foxy eyes and sharp features did not look as though they needed any especial incentive to watchfulness beyond nature's prompting. At the door he turned and asked, with a certain jealous curiosity, "When you catch the fellow, what are you going to do with him?"

As the eyes of father and son met significantly, it would have been difficult to say which shot forth the greater malignity; the only difference was that in Udo's it was natural, in the Baron's it seemed rather acquired by the practice of a relentless statecraft. "He must pay the usual penalty of high treason," he answered.

Udo's sharp look broadened into a meaning smile. "In such a manner that neither the offence nor the punishment is likely to reach interested ears."

"Assuredly," said the Chancellor.

Not a word had come to Princess Ruperta as a consequence of the night's adventure. No word to tell her whether her lover was dead or alive, no sign of punishment for her escapade, no hint even that it was known.

Her father was pompously kind as usual, proud of her imperious beauty, for which he took the credit. So the Chancellor, who, of course, knew, had not thought it proper to tell his royal master; for whatever the Duke's faults were, he was no dissembler. But this, the consequence to herself, scarcely troubled the Princess in the terrible suspense she endured through the uncertainty of her lover's fate. When the first paroxysm of despair was over and she had recovered from her swoon, her habitual self-command reasserted itself, and she gave way no more to her feelings. Only Minna, who knew her so well, could guess from a mere shade's difference in her manner how deep and bitter they were. On one point only was she unrestrained, that was in blaming herself and Minna for inviting Ludovic to what they had had every reason to know might prove a death-trap. For that he had met his death the Princess was sure, although every beat of her heart incited her to doubt it. She read in the silence which was kept towards her that all was over; the merciless hand had shut and clasped for ever the book wherein those sweet words were written. Ah, she could not endure the thought that the voice whose whispered tones had vibrated every chord within her was silent, that the arm that had protected her and clasped her in that dear embrace was cold for evermore. Hers had been a starved life, and now when the wave of love for which she was athirst rippled to her parched lips, it was driven back by this storm of tragedy. Her whole nature now turned in fierce rebellion against the annihilator of her happiness. As the hours went by the torture of an unavailing despair became intolerable. The passion within her was none the less intense that it was voiceless; her rage against Rollmar seemed to have spread itself into every fibre of her body. That she had been rash in leading her lover into a trap in no wise altered the vileness of the fact that the trap was set. Had Ludovic really been taken in it? Minna was persistent and never wa-

vered, at least ostensibly, in her belief that he had escaped. But her mistress brushed aside every theory that argued for his safety.

"You might know the Baron by this," she said, resenting the flattering insistence of false hopes. "He does not make a mistake ever. His methods are as sure as they are remorseless. I caught a glimpse of him from the window just now. It was not the face of a man who had failed."

"I might retort, dear Highness," maintained Minna, "that you might know him well enough to put no trust in that ugly, wrinkled mask. You will learn nothing from our amiable Baron."

"But I will," Ruperta exclaimed impetuously. "I will. He shall tell me what he has done. I will challenge him this very night. There is no secret now between us; and if there were, the time for fearing him is past. Happily, this abominable scheme has given me a hold over him, and he shall see that he has not a baby to deal with."

There was a reception that night at the Palace, and Princess Ruperta kept her word. No one who saw her as she entered the Hall of Audience could have guessed her sufferings. Except that she was slightly flushed, she seemed cold and proud and as magnificently beautiful as ever. When the formal reception was over, the Duke descended from the dais and stood chatting with the members of his immediate circle. The general company began to circulate in the hall and the suite of state apartments which led from it, and the hum of a subdued conversation rose.

Princess Ruperta, watching her opportunity, met Rollmar as, putting an end to what seemed the somewhat inconvenient questioning of one of the foreign representatives, he turned away in his abrupt manner and left the royal circle.

A less acute man would have recognized that she had

planted herself in his way with an object, but he gave no sign that he so understood it, his face showing nothing but a courtier's smile as he bowed before her. The Court etiquette kept clear a space round them, so that the low tones of their talk could not well be overheard, although curious glances might note the remarkable contrast between the withered old man and the radiant beauty.

Ruperta came to the point at once, since it was doubtful how long opportunity might serve her.

"You, or rather your hirelings, took a strange liberty last night, Baron."

Her voice was just steady, but he knew the effort it cost her. An old diplomatist and word-fencer, he never hesitated to cut short his party when he saw an opening for a *riposte*. He looked up from his bow into the proud, indignant face.

"One which was forced upon me by the liberty which your Highness has been so unwise as to permit yourself."

He spoke with the firmness and confidence of a strong will and the prestige of successful statesmanship. But she met unflinchingly even the electric touch of his dominant personality.

"It is abominable," she said. "I will not submit to your interference."

Glancing at her sharply with those unfathomable eyes, he just gave a slight deprecating drop of the head as he replied firmly—

"Not mine, Princess, but the State's."

"The State's!" she echoed hotly. "You take too much upon yourself. I will not submit to it. You may rule my father, but you shall not control my actions."

He was looking at her fixedly now. There was little of the courtier about the old minister as he retorted pointedly, "It is a pity your Highness should render control from outside a necessity."

Her teeth were set in her lip till it was as white as her complexion. Only the heaving of her bosom betrayed

the force of her excitement. "It is neither necessary nor acceptable," she returned imperiously. All this time the question she longed, yet dreaded to ask, was at her lips, yet unspoken, as though she were fearful to invoke the spectre of the truth. Yet she felt that to be thus at issue with Rollmar was purposeless and undignified; it was certainly not for that she had accosted him. Now she felt she must put the question, let the consequences be what they might. She took a steadying breath, but there was just a little flinching drop of the eyes, and then, in a voice which would have struck a passing observer as quietly cold, almost indifferent, she said—

"As you have gone to last night's unwarrantable lengths, may I ask, Baron, the result of your creatures' attack?"

"Ah!" The suspicion of a smile softened for an instant the hard, dry mask that confronted her. Had he suspected her reason for alluding to a subject she would naturally have avoided? Anyhow, it was patent now. "The result," he answered slowly, "I cannot tell you."

She gave a look of something like disgust at his almost brutal want of consideration. Did he mean to force her to question him further, and so incidentally acknowledge the facts of her part in the affair? It was hateful, yet, she told herself, quite like him. She wished she could strike him dead as he stood there before her mocking her almost frantic anxiety with a smile of infinite evasion. Was the man a fiend that he would not speak more fully? The answer he had given her was truly Delphic. It might mean nothing, and, what was more probable, it might mean the worst. Still, as she had stooped to ask, she would press her question now till she got a tangible answer.

"I wish to know," she said insistently, "what happened to the person whom you set your men to attack?"

But for a trace of temper she was quite calm now. The chill of despair was creeping over her, and the racking

suspense gave way before it. Rollmar looked at her curiously, almost as though wondering whether he might attribute her calm to a callousness akin to his own.

"Your question, Princess," he replied with the same Sphinx-like closeness, "is perhaps one which is better left unanswered."

"All the same, I must have an answer," she persisted.

"Then," he said, with uncompromising decision, "I have to tell your Highness that you will not be troubled any more by the person to whom I presume you refer."

Into his eyes, which were fixed with calm severity on her face, there flashed a look of surprise. A rapid and unaccountable change had come over her expression. Was she actress enough to receive a stab in the heart with an air of joy? For the sudden light in her eyes was surely nothing else. But for an instant was he at a loss; then he turned quickly and looked behind him. The crowd was moving to and fro, talking, laughing, all decorously as under the royal eye; the Chancellor's sharp and significant scrutiny caused many a furtive glance at the pair, and perhaps cried halt to more than one unguarded remark. His quick, rapacious eyes took in every detail of the human medley, then suddenly glanced back, keen as a hawk's, to his companion's face. But the look which had startled him had gone. He saw nothing but a cold self-possession with just a suspicion of triumph in the half-contemptuous eyes.

"You have answered my question, Baron," she said simply, and without the mocking lip he looked for; "and I thank you. It is well to know our friends—and our enemies."

"Your Highness," he returned, "will never have anything but a true friend in Adrian Rollmar."

"Whose deeds to secure her happiness will speak for themselves." The mockery was there now, as, with a slight bow, she turned and left him.

Your man of action is never left standing at a loss by

discomfiture. With purposeful alacrity, Rollmar turned away on his side and looked for his son.

"Udo," he said, when, as in response to a sign, the young man joined him, "the man is here. The man we seek: Princess Ruperta's lover."

"Ah, where is he? Let us——"

The Baron made a restraining gesture. "I do not know him even by sight; have no idea who he is; but that he is here I am certain. Watch the Princess. I will have my men ready. To-night must see the end of this folly."

It was not long before the Princess, her every sense of observation quickened by excitement, became aware that the sharp eyes of Udo Rollmar were following her every movement. The same whisper that told Minna of Ludovic's safety warned her of the spy.

"You must contrive to put him on his guard," she said, "while I draw Captain Udo away. But, above all, beware of the Baron. I cannot see him, but feel sure he is watching from his spider's corner."

When they had separated, and Minna, on the arm of the vainest and, consequently, the most stupid Court popinjay she could find, had strolled off in search of Ludovic, the Princess signed graciously to Udo and brought that fierce little fox to her side.

"You are quite determined to avoid us to-night, Captain von Rollmar," she said, forcing a spirit of banter with the man she now loathed.

Udo's glance, as it met hers, changed from one of artful resentment to a certain fiery admiration. With the object he had in view, it was, he felt, waste of time to talk to her; he would have preferred to watch and mark down her lover, thereby at one stroke appeasing his own jealousy and paying her for the trick she had played him. But in the veins of the fox-like little Captain, while he had much of his father's malicious keenness, ran warmer blood, and he was thus liable to a weakness against which assuredly the Chancellor was proof. The flush of excite-

ment, of joy at the sight of her lover, had given a radiance to Princess Ruperta's beauty and an animation, an exaltation which it usually lacked. To-night it was perfect, striking, irresistible. It flashed down upon the cunning little face before her, the sharp, crafty eyes with their red lashes, the carefully turned-up moustache, and general dandified treatment of a natural repulsiveness; and in that flash it took and held captive the treacherous mind opposed to her. For that mind told him he had never seen such radiant, imperious beauty. To turn his back upon it when there was an opportunity of luxuriating in it would be the act of a Stoic or a madman, and he was neither. He was quite shrewd enough to know there was but a poor chance for him in the long run, that even now he was but favoured for a purpose; but then he was vain, and the future flattered him with possibilities, vague, desperate, yet not unachievable. At least, his father's schemes and his own vindictiveness could wait for half an hour.

"If that was your idea, Highness," he replied, "you might have attributed my seeming avoidance to the consciousness that my society might not be welcome."

She laughed. Reading in his eyes the effect she was working, she took care to keep him well under the spell. "Since when has Captain Udo von Rollmar grown diffident?"

"Since his Princess showed him clearly, if unintentionally, that his company was only welcome as a means to an end."

Still smarting under the trick, he could not resist the taunt. But she lightly ignored it.

"A means to an end? Is not that the reason of all good companionship? What better end than pleasure?"

Though the voice and half confidential manner thrilled him almost to intoxication, he knew that the words were quibbling and insincere, that the woman was fighting for her lover with every wit sharpened by the exigency of the

situation. But that merely spurred his determination to pursue this forlorn hope. At least, sincere or insincere, she was giving him a lead; who could blame him if he followed it? And, after all, if nothing better came of it, retaliation lay that way. Even an august princess should not make him foot this fool's dance without paying the piper.

"The pleasure, my Princess," he replied craftily, "may be one-sided."

She gave him a quick, offended glance. "How do you mean? One-sided?"

"Do not misunderstand me," he pursued. "I should have said disproportionate. The slight pleasure which you are gracious enough to acknowledge, my Princess, may be a dear joy, a terrible pleasure to me."

If its origin was in craft, he felt as he looked at her that the sentiment was true enough. It was, indeed, a dangerous beauty; one to hurry a man to the pit of despair; and as he drank it in he found himself vowing it should not be so with him.

They had left the great Hall of Audience and were in one of the smaller of the state reception rooms. So far her purpose was accomplished, and one of the spies held safe where he could work no harm.

"You take," she said, "the matter too seriously."

"Can any one blame me for that, gracious Princess?" he returned, feeling his way cautiously since he knew well her power of setting presumption down.

"Of course I am to blame," she suggested, hiding with a smile her distaste for the business she was about.

"Are you not?" he rejoined, growing bolder as his determination to profit by her complaisance increased.

"If I dared to ask you to put yourself for one moment in my place. To get a smile from the loveliest woman in Europe, to be permitted to walk by her side, to talk to her without restraint, in short, to be lifted from this common world into another and a glorious sphere; then to know

that he must fall back to the cold earth again after those moments of Heaven; Princess, imagine this and say whether the author of this desolation would deserve blame or pity."

He spoke with a feeling and impetuosity which were foreign to him, and, as she listened in little more than curiosity, she wondered whether it was feigned or true. If genuine, she could have little pity for the man, and if false, none. But she realized as the speech grew warmer that the situation was becoming unpleasant.

"You are determined to make friendship a terribly serious business," she said with gentle irresponsiveness. "Now, will you in turn try to put yourself in my place? Then you will see how barren and lonely a life must be which is denied pleasant intercourse with its fellows."

"The fire must burn alone," he replied. "The more glowing it is the farther we must keep from it unless we would be consumed."

She laughed. "Poor fellow! And you are scorched?"

Perhaps her laugh stung him, for, as they sat together, he turned to her fiercely.

"I am scorched," he answered with intensity. "It is for you to say whether it shall be to the death."

Something in his manner made her check the part she was playing.

"I do not understand you, Captain von Rollmar," she said, as she rose with a touch of proud dignity.

He sprang up and stood before her. "I hope that each of us misunderstands the other," he said meaningly.

"How?" she demanded, with the imperious light in her eyes.

He had got past restraint now, and was aggressively insistent. "I mean," he went on, "that I have suspected you of playing a trick upon me, of showing me unlooked-for, un hoped-for favour to further a certain purpose. How else could I account for your gracious condescension?"

There was a touch of mockery in his speech. She welcomed it, at least it was better than tenderness. But it was, considering their positions, rude and she resented it.

"You are using a freedom which is the best reproof to my mistake," she said coldly. "It is scarcely gallant or respectful to suggest that I have played a trick upon you."

"You compel me, Princess, to speak plainly," he retorted. "If your high station does not prevent your using your powers to amuse yourself with me it is hardly fair to screen yourself behind it. I am not the fool you have sought to make me. I know you have a lover."

She flushed. "You are insolent, Captain von Rollmar. It is you who avail yourself of your father's position to take strange liberties. Please do not say any more. I am sorry that I took any notice of you."

She moved sideways to get past him, but he still barred her way. "Do not add to your discourtesy," she said with chilling contempt.

He showed no heed of her command, standing before her with lowering face and ablaze with passion. "You must hear me, Princess," he insisted hoarsely. "There are spirits easier to call up than to lay. You spoke just now of my father, of his position," he continued rapidly, as though determined to get out the speech which was at his lips. "That position is one of the most powerful in Europe; and, incidentally, it places me, his son, almost on a level with you. No, hear me out," for with an exclamation of impatient scorn, she had moved away. "So there is nothing so very ridiculous and unheard-of in my pretensions."

"Your pretensions?" she repeated, disdainfully smiling.

"My pretensions," he maintained doggedly, "to love you, to seek your hand."

"Captain von Rollmar, are you mad?" she cried.

"Not at all," he returned resolutely.

"Putting aside the absurdity of these pretensions of yours," she said, content to argue and so gain time, while expecting every moment would bring Minna to her rescue, "you forget that, by your father's policy, my hand is already bestowed."

"I think, Princess," he retorted, "that since you forget it, I may be pardoned for ignoring it."

The reply was natural and obvious enough, but from the speaker it was more, it was intolerable.

"At least," she rejoined haughtily, "if I turn aside from the way Baron von Rollmar has marked out for me I may at least be permitted to take which path I choose."

"You have scarcely chosen wisely," he said with a curious softening of his aggressive manner. "The path you are treading leads to danger. Let me conduct you to a safe one leading to happiness, Princess," he continued earnestly, and his face lighted by the glow of his ardour came as near to beauty as such a face could, "there is only one man on earth in whose favour my father would renounce his cherished scheme. Any other who aspires to you simply courts his own destruction. You have to choose between Prince Ludwig, who treats you as I know you of all women hate to be treated, with neglect and worse, you must choose between him and me, who love you to adoration."

"Must I?"

He searched her eyes for the effect of his pleading, since her tone gave no clue, but these were equally cold.

"There is no other alternative," he protested, taking her exclamation as a simple question and ignoring its possible note of defiance.

"Then," she retorted, "it is open to me to make one."

"No, no. It is madness," he protested. "Is there need, my sweetest Princess? Why will you misjudge me? Were we married we could defy——"

"I have listened to your absurdities too long," she exclaimed with a flash of scorn. "Enough! Never!"

But as she moved away, this time with determination, he seized her hand. "Princess," he urged resolutely, "you shall hear me. You shall return the love you have called forth. You make me desperate, and——"

She, looking past him, gave a little cry. Instantly he dropped the hand he was by force keeping and turned. A man was in the door-way, a man with set face and eyes as those of one who stares at the wavering balance of his fate. There was for the moment a pause of speechless embarrassment, then Ludovic, with a bow and muttered apology, passed out of sight.

But as Udo turned back to his companion she saw with fear that his look had changed from annoyance to triumph.

"Your lover?" he asked in a tone that needed no answer. "At last he is found. You had better grant my prayer, Princess."

Fate, he realized, had in that moment put a weapon into his hands. How well it would serve he had yet to determine, but at least he would use it. And Ruperta on her part, in that unlooked-for crisis, debated in desperation what line she would take.

"Your prayer?" she repeated to gain time for her feverish thoughts to take shape.

"Accept my love," he insisted.

"And why, pray?" she asked, coldly indifferent once more, "because that man was a witness to your unmannerly behaviour?"

His face darkened. "That man was your lover."

"Indeed? Then I must have two," she said ambiguously.

He was baffled but would not show it. "You may only have one by sunrise," he rejoined viciously, significantly. Minna came in.

"Is it love or hate?" he demanded quickly.

"Neither, I hope," Ruperta returned, with a laugh.

CHAPTER XII

IN THE MERCURY PAVILION

I HAVE found your man I think," Udo said to his father.

"Ah? Who is he?"

"That I propose to find out. A stranger."

The Chancellor looked serious. "Are you sure? How can the Princess have become acquainted with a stranger?"

Udo gave a shrug. "At least he is known enough to be here. Come; I will show him to you."

They strolled observantly through the rooms. "There! The man in the foreign uniform talking to General Rovigno."

"So!" The hawk's glance had marked down the victim. "You are certain, Udo?"

"Hardly enough, perhaps, to send the fellow to the fate that awaits him," Udo answered casually. "But I will make certain. It is a mere question of watching."

"Better find out first who he is," the Chancellor observed. He signed to a resplendent Court official who immediately came up with a bow.

"I do not recognize that young officer, Herr Oberkammerer."

"Possibly not, Excellency," the functionary replied with another bow. "He is a stranger visiting the country. He comes from Beroldstein. His name is Lieutenant von Bertheim."

"From Beroldstein? You are sure?"

"Quite, Excellency. He came furnished with a Court introduction through the Drax-Beroldstein embassy. Is there any reason for objecting——"

"Oh, no," Rollmar protested. "A very distinguished looking young man. Thank you, Herr Oberkammerer."

He turned away from the ceremonious official and drew Udo aside. "Make certain," he said; "and as soon as you have put the matter beyond a doubt, let me know."

He thought the identity quite feasible, still a blunder was a thing he detested. Before striking he must make sure.

And Udo watched lynxlike for the confirmation of his guess; shrewdly keeping observation on the Princess rather than on her suspected lover. But for that untoward episode of a few minutes before, he might have watched till the sharp green eyes grew tired without detecting what he sought. Von Bertheim had been cunningly warned by Minna and was not likely to betray the Princess or himself by the slightest sign. But now discovery was threatened by Ruperta's distress. A pretty greeting, she told herself bitterly, she had given the lover who had a few hours before risked his life for her, whom she might have been supposed to believe dead, to be surprised in the act of allowing another man to make love to her. Ludovic's face had shown his mortification, he had seen enough for that, too little to comprehend the real nature of the scene. He would know she was not a woman to permit an admirer to go to that length unchecked unless she were willing. She was pre-eminently one who could fence herself round with a cold indifference which no unacceptable ardour could melt. The unlucky moment had found her in a hatefully false position, one of which the mere thought was intolerable. She must at all hazards set it right, and, above all, warn her lover against the Rollmars and their manifest designs. That she would

run a terrible risk was obvious, but, at least to Ludovic von Bertheim, the danger was pressing in any event.

"Come," she said to Minna, "I must speak to him, must warn him."

"Your highness!" the girl remonstrated. "No, no. It is sheer madness. I have already warned him. If it must be repeated, let me speak to him."

But Ruperta was determined. "Come with me. Trust me to take care. I am no fool."

The throng was thinning now; some had left, many were at supper. The Princess could go where she would without the irksomeness of finding a lane opening for her, or the risk of being jostled.

"I last saw him in the Vandyke room," Minna said. They strolled arm in arm through the rooms, the Princess greeting many of the guests as they passed. Ludovic was still where Minna had left him, still talking or rather listening to the garrulous old General.

"Take care," Minna said in a warning undertone, "Udo is watching us."

Ruperta laughed. They passed through the room without noticing von Bertheim by more than a return of the bow with which he and his companion saluted them. "Oh, that noble Udo, that *preux chevalier*," was Ruperta's mocking comment. "Let us turn. Now keep your eyes open for the red fox. Ah, he is gone."

"At least he is invisible," Minna said, on her guard.

As they passed von Bertheim and the General the Princess's handkerchief fell. Ludovic saw and sprang forward to restore it. She stopped for an instant and took it from him. Several people had come into the room and saw the action; none of them could have noticed in it more than a common incident of courtesy. They could not dream that the receiving hand thrilled that which gave with a quick pressure, that the murmured words were far more than those of thanks. Only one pair of sharp, avid, ravening eyes, suddenly visible from their ambush, saw

what they desired, yet hated to see, saw proof of what had been conjecture, saw a near and certain revenge. It was enough. The jealous, vindictive glance just lingered for a moment on the pleasant sight of death in that face which raised itself in happy confidence; then the gallant Udo von Rollmar turned with a smile of satisfaction and hurried to his father.

"It is as well to be certain," observed the Chancellor with his cynical smile, as he nodded his acceptance of the information. "You may leave the affair to me, Udo."

"Can I be of any use?"

"You? No. My men are ready. It is butcher's work."

Ten minutes later a written message, signed R., was mysteriously put into the Lieutenant's hand bidding him wait in the little garden pavilion which stood in the shrubbery a short distance from the place. It was called the Pavilion of Mercury, from a figure by which it was surmounted. He had freed himself from the General's somewhat boring prolixity and was debating with himself whether he should stay or go, when the message was brought him by a little page of honour. In delight that he had waited and so not missed it, he made his way out into the palace grounds, taking heed that his movements were not too curiously observed. The words which Ruperta had spoken when he restored her handkerchief had been enough to allay the doubts with which the scene he had witnessed with Udo Rollmar had filled his mind. Indeed it was almost inconceivable that a girl of the Princess's character could be captivated by a man like the Chancellor's son. And now the full explanation of that equivocal situation would doubtless be given him.

Von Ompertz had received his orders, the most distasteful of his life, and stood with his two satellites waiting grimly for his man. He had on the first shock of Rollmar's order, met it by a refusal. It was indeed, as the Chancellor had designated it, butcher's work, and he was

a soldier with the strain of his innate nobility ever ready to assume, sometimes to his detriment, the function of a conscience. He loved fighting for its own sake and was ready enough to slay his fellow man in hot blood; but in cold? To become a midnight assassin? Pfui! It went against that same make-shift conscience of his. But the astute old reader of men's characters and motives had made short work of his objection, although he judged it prudent to condescend to a certain amount of persuasive argument. It was a State service, this deed which looked so black; far more important in its way than the killing of a score of the Duke's enemies in battle. The honour of an illustrious house, of a royal name, was deeply concerned; only to a man like the Captain, of absolute trustworthiness, of honourable principles above the run of his class, could the secret vindication of the royal honour be entrusted. And then there was the obvious ugly alternative should the quixotic refusal be persisted in. The rope round Captain von OmPERTZ's neck was only loosened, it was still there, but this service would make him quit of it altogether.

So the free-lance, seeing this was no situation for trifling, was fain to buy his life by consenting to what he tried to persuade himself was a bounden if disagreeable duty to the State whose hospitality he had enjoyed and to its Minister whose pay he was taking, and who, after all, was a better judge of the act's justification than he himself could be.

Accordingly he had taken his station, secure from notice, at a point among the azalea bushes which commanded the path leading from below the terrace to the Mercury Pavilion. He saw a man's figure emerge from the shadow of the high parapet and advance quickly along the alley which ran a few yards in front of where they stood. He made a sign to the two who waited behind him, and all three crouched down expectantly.

Von Bertheim came on steadily, unsuspectingly. They

could hear his footsteps, now passing close to their ambush, presently striking the stone step of the pavilion and entering. Like feline beasts of prey they crept toward their quarry; Ompertz with a campaigner's expert caution, the two Italians with the fell litness of tracking leopards. Noiselessly they gained the alley and now retreat was cut off, the trap was complete.

"Wait here," he whispered, motioning back the cut-throats at his side. "If I need you I will call."

But one pressed forward at his shoulder. "Better make sure this time, Captain," he urged.

However, Ompertz preferred to do the ill work his own way. In his idea the victim, being, as the uniform had told him, a soldier, should meet his death at the hands of a soldier, not at those of a professional spy and assassin which he shrewdly suspected to be the vocation of his two assistants.

"Stay here," he repeated authoritatively. "I am no bungler—this is one's man's work."

He went forward alone and stood in the doorway of the pavilion. Ludovic, who was sitting on a rustic chair at the farther side of the little room, started up at the sound of his step and began to cross to the door. Then he stopped, seeing it was a man's figure that filled the entrance. A stream of moonlight came through the window and lay slantwise across the room, dividing the two men. Into this band of light a glittering object was suddenly projected. It was the barrel of a pistol pointing straight at Ludovic's heart. He gave a quick cry.

"Hold your hand, fellow! I am——"

There was an answering, half smothered exclamation as the pistol was lowered and Ompertz's face peered forward, coming into the shaft of light. "Lieutenant von Bertheim!" he said in a shocked whisper. "You? And, God forgive me, I was about to——"

"To put me out of Chancellor Rollmar's way," his intended victim supplied with a laugh. "If you have

any scruples as to disobeying your orders I think I can remove them."

Ompertz held up his hand warningly. "There are two Italian scoundrels outside to make sure the thing is done," he said in a rapid whisper. "You saved my life; I'll pay that debt if it costs my own."

"There is no need, my friend," Ludovic began, but before he had time to say more, Ompertz had raised his pistol and fired at the wall. "Now," he commanded hurriedly, "fall down, quick! down with you and I'll swear you are dead."

He had caught Von Bertheim by the shoulders and urged him to the floor. For a moment the other seemed inclined to refuse, then changed his mind and, with a laugh at the situation, lay down as he might have fallen had the shot taken its originally intended effect. Ompertz bent down and covered his supposed victim's face with his cloak just as the two evil visages of his assistants looked in at the door.

He held up a restraining hand as they came forward. "No bungle this time," he announced grimly; "a bullet through the heart leaves no room for doubt."

He whipped aside the cloak from Ludovic's face, which happily lay in shadow, and then replaced it; pretended to feel the pulse, let the hand fall with a thud, and turned to the door. "Now to report to his Excellency," he said motioning them out before him. "Come! I'll have the fellow respected now that he can do no more harm." So he baulked their curiosity, sturdily sent them out of the place and, following, closed the door.

The Princess and Minna with arms linked had strolled out upon the terrace. The atmosphere of the rooms had seemed charged with excitement that evening, and the calm glory of the night with its soft, pure air was infinitely refreshing. Here the Chancellor found them when he came out in grim expectancy of the report that one more human obstacle had been removed from his path. It was

an untoward encounter; certainly the Princess, glad as perhaps he might have been to teach her a lesson and show his fell power, was otherwise the last witness he wanted for his anticipated interview.

Still he greeted them suavely enough, and then remarked that the air was chilly and that the Princess would do well to go indoors.

"I do not feel it," she objected. "It seems to me quite warm and balmy."

"Nevertheless it is chilly," he insisted in the domineering tone which came so easily to him. "Your Highness should be advised. The obligation not to trifle with royal health extends far beyond a personal consideration."

"It seems that royal health is of far more account than royal happiness," she could not help retorting.

"Indeed, no," he returned, ignoring, in his unruffled way, any significance in the speech. "Your health, gracious Princess, means happiness to all your father's subjects and surely to yourself. And it is your happiness for which with all my ability and experience I unceasingly strive. Only be convinced of that, dear Highness, and let me——"

The sound of a shot broke the stillness of the night-shrouded park. Ruperta turned quickly in the direction whence it had come.

"What was that?" she exclaimed, in a voice which foreboding filled with dread.

"It is nothing," Rollmar answered with a shrug, "which need concern your Highness."

She was regarding him searchingly, her eyes full of a fearful suspicion. "A pistol shot under the very palace walls. Surely——" She stopped as though unable to control her voice. Her lips were trembling and her face, in the light from the window, was white.

"May I beg you to go in, Highness?" the Baron repeated, extending his arm to keep open the window.

In that moment the cold, statuesque beauty was trans-

formed in a fashion that startled even the imperturbable Chancellor. Her face flushed and her eyes were alight with bitterness and anger.

"I know now," she said hotly, "why you were anxious for me to go in, what this chill air of yours meant. It was to get me out of the way of your dastardly act, your fiendish work. I know. You have killed the man whom you have been hunting down so atrociously; assassin, vile murderer that you are. And you dare, hypocritical wretch, to talk of my health. I will go and see your work, and if it be as I suspect, I swear before Heaven you shall bitterly rue it!"

Rollmar stepped before her. "Princess, this is madness. You must not go. You are wrong."

"Liar!" she flashed out at him passionately, the flood of her anger keeping back the waters of desolation that were ready to flow over her soul. "Show me that I am wrong. Take me there. Prove it. Ah, you dare not! But I will see——"

"Dear Highness——" Minna began to remonstrate apprehensively, but Ruperta had pushed aside all opposition and was running towards the steps that led down from the terrace.

As Rollmar followed her, his temper hardly soothed by the unfortunate chance which had marred the complete success of the business, his sharp eyes saw the expected three figures drawing out from the shadow of the wooded alley. He quickened his pace, meanwhile sternly ordering Minna to stop the Princess. "Come back, Highness!" he cried, "I order you. Your father shall know of this."

Minna, impelled more by fear of the horror which might be waiting them than the Chancellor's threat, ran quickly and caught her by the arm, trying to draw her back.

"Dear Highness, I entreat you, do not go farther," she panted.

But the three were by this time quite visible.

"Look! Those men!" Ruperta cried. "Ah, I will know!"

Rollmar, caught her, angrily, it seemed, by the arm. "Your Highness is exceeding all propriety," he said.

"As your Excellency is exceeding all justice and all humanity," she retorted.

He made a gesture of impatience. "Have your own way, then. But I have warned your Highness."

Without staying for further words, Ruperta turned again and ran distractedly down the alley leading to the pavilion. Recalling himself from a moment's critical thought, Rollmar looked round at his agents, "Well?"

Ompertz bowed. "It is well, Excellency. I have hardly bungled this time. These men have seen him dead. One shot was enough."

The Chancellor glanced for corroboration at the Italians who bowed with a word of confirmation. "Good," he said. "I will see what further orders are needful. Captain von Ompertz, you may report yourself at my bureau at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

As the soldier bowed and turned away, Rollmar made a sign to one of the Italians, and, as he came near, whispered a hurried word to him. The man nodded, and then the two went off by the way Ompertz had taken, leaving the Chancellor standing alone in keen thought.

Ruperta, followed fearfully by Minna, had reached the pavilion and it was not until her foot was on the threshold that she stopped, sick and faint at heart, not daring to look in. But her pause was in silence, save for her quick breathing; the cry of her heart found no utterance. Then a desperate longing to know the worst nerved her to look in, and she saw the room was empty. Scarcely daring to trust her eyes, she signed to Minna and went in. The thing she dreaded was not there; the two women stood and looked into each other's face in wonder. Then there was the sound of a step at the door. If it were

Rollmar——. Ruperta went quickly to it, and gave a great gasp of joy as she was clasped in her lover's arms.

"Ah, my love, my dear love!" she murmured. Then, when their kisses allowed speech, he told her in a few words what had happened.

"You are mad to stay here," she said, holding him fast nevertheless.

"How can I go?" he protested. "Ah, if you only were content to marry Prince——"

She shook her head impatiently. "That is now farther from me than ever," she declared. "That shall never be, I swear to you, my love."

At last she made him go, saying she would let him run no more risks for her sake, yet doubting how they should cease. And he assured her that he feared nothing, that with a love like theirs all must be well. And that made her sad, knowing well how experience was against that comfortable hope and that love counts as a very minus quantity against State policy.

Nevertheless, when she went back to the Palace, the Chancellor, watching for her with grim expectation, was not a little puzzled at what he saw in her face.

CHAPTER XIII

OMPERTZ FINISHES HIS NIGHT'S WORK

CAPTAIN VON OMPERTZ, when the Chancellor had dismissed him, made very natural haste to get clear of the palace precincts before his deception should be discovered. He had not, however, gone far when he found he was being caught up by one of his late associates, the Italian to whom Rollmar had whispered. Judging it wiser to appear in no particular haste, he turned and waited for the fellow to join him.

"Ah, you are going home, Capitano, after a pretty night's work. May I come with you as far as our ways lie together?"

Now if Ompertz had really carried out his late orders he would have declined, with no complimentary language, the company of a man whom he loathed and whose associateship he resented. But to-night he could scarcely with prudence refuse the fellow's proposal, so they went on together.

"I am in haste to get to my lodging," he said. "So step out, signore. I hope to-night's work has been more acceptable to you than it has to me."

The Italian, edging his lithe body close to his companion's shoulder, as with quickly gliding steps he kept pace with the soldier's stride, threw out his arms with a deprecating gesture.

"*Basta! Capitano mio*, such little affairs are common enough at our Court. Our Chancellor ever takes the nearest way to his destination. A wise man does not

wait for a wasp to sting him before he crushes it. And the Baron has the wisest head in Europe to-day."

"And the reddest hand, eh?"

"Ah, *amico mio*, a kingdom is not to be maintained in safety without the judicious spilling of a little blood. Better a few drops of rain than a storm, a little blood-letting than a fever."

"That is true enough," Ompertz assented, not caring to express his real views on the subject. "And we servants of the State, must regard ourselves as the great surgeon's lancets, eh?"

"Exactly," grinned the Italian. "And we should have as little feeling and curiosity as the scarifying knife, be as empty of scruples as is the cupping glass of air."

"Oh, I shall get used to it, never fear," the Captain assured him.

They were making their way to one of the side gates of the park which opened upon an outskirt of the town, and now had reached the outer belt of woodland, near the spot where Ompertz had once lain concealed. It was his intention, as soon as they should have passed through the gate, to separate from his companion, not caring even at that time of the night to be seen walking through the streets with him.

As they went quickly along under the trees Ompertz stumbled over a projecting root and nearly fell, but managed to recover himself. But the stumble made him aware of a peculiar action on the part of the Italian which put him keenly on his guard. When his foot caught the root the impetus of the quick pace at which they were walking sent him headlong some yards before he could right himself. His companion made a sudden spring after him, only to reach him just as he recovered his balance. As Ompertz half turned, he fancied he caught a certain ugly gleam in the other's uplifted hand, but the Italian quickly lowered his arm and threw out the other with a pretence of steadying him.

"*Davvero!* That was nearly a bad fall, Capitano," he observed with an awkward laugh, and Ompertz told himself that if the stumble had sent him a foot less far, and so just out of the other's reach it would indeed have been a fall from which he might never have risen. However, he kept a wary eye on the Italian, grimly alert for his expected attack, and so they passed out of the gate together.

Here he halted. "Which is your way, Signor Calosi?"

The Italian pointed townwards. "Surely we go to the city together," he suggested with feline courtesy.

Ompertz checked his first impulse which was uncereemoniously to separate from the fellow. He nodded, and they walked on together along the gloomy road skirting the park wall. Very bitter and resentful thoughts were in his mind as he realized his position and his employer's treacherous intention. It was plain enough. He was supposed to have done his work, and so was to be incontinently put out of the way as the possessor of a dangerous secret. And within the hour Rollmar had flattered him, spoken of his honour and trustworthiness, and promised him his absolute freedom as the price of his night's work, while all the time he was marking him down for the assassin's knife. His blood boiled at the idea, and he exulted fiercely in the thought of the trick he had played on the treacherous old Chancellor and of a second thwarting on which he was grimly resolved. So he kept on with the Italian, having the object of giving that worthy a chance of repeating his attempt. It was not long in coming. This time it was Calosi who stumbled, or pretended to do so. The spot was one which Ompertz had shrewdly suspected he would choose for the attack; darker than the rest of the obscure way by reason of the overhanging trees. Moreover, it was the last convenient place for a dark deed before they should approach the outlying houses of the city.

At Calosi's stumble, Ompertz, who was on the watch

for a trick, gave a sudden spring forward and turned, at the same time whipping out his sword already loosened in its scabbard. As he anticipated, he faced round to meet the Italian's dagger raised for the stroke he had so cunningly avoided.

"You cursed, black-muzzled dastard!" he cried with a derisive laugh. "You shall pay for that coystril's trick," and with that made a lunge at him.

The Italian's face at first showed an attempt to laugh the thing off, but its futility was so apparent and the soldier's blade so pressing, that he speedily abandoned it and set to work to defend himself as best he could.

"Ah, my poor Capitano, it is enough," he exclaimed in terror as, putting aside a thrust at his heart, he felt the blade pierce his shoulder. "I will confess!" he screamed, as the irresistible attack grew hotter. "I will give you—"

"Silence, you pest, you treacherous dog!" Ompertz cried, setting his teeth. "If you choose to play your murderous tricks on a stronger man you must be ready for the penalty." And so, bearing down the Italian's desperate defence, he ran him through.

Calosi fell with a gasping cry and had expired ere he touched the ground. Ompertz drew back his sword and wiped it on the dead man's cloak, shaking his head with a troubled countenance as he sheathed it.

"I'd as lief this had not happened," he muttered, "but it was necessary, and 'tis done. Well, my head can scarce be in greater jeopardy now than it was before, and at least this gives me a few hours' start."

Hastily he rolled the body into the ditch that ran under the park wall, where it lay concealed by the over-growing grass and weeds. "Well, there is one scoundrel the fewer walking the earth to-night," he commented. "If I hang for this I shall leave the world a trifle better than I found it. He effaced the blood marks from the path, and hurried on to the city.

As he gained the narrow streets his devil-may-care

humour, which had been repressed by the events of the night, returned; he hummed a tune and strode along with his characteristic jauntiness. Once he stopped and seemed to debate with himself whether he should go on or turn back. "No; I must do it," he said. "A good turn from a stranger is worth six from a friend; and, after all, my life is not of such wonderful value or surety that I need think twice about risking it."

So, starting on again with a more purposeful gait, he soon arrived at the door of Ludovic von Bertheim's lodging. As he looked up at the windows for a light, the man he sought came round the corner.

"Well met, Lieutenant," he said with a military salute. "I came on my way to—who knows?—the gallows, probably, to give you a word of warning."

"Come in," Ludovic replied, and led the way.

The soldier smacked his lips significantly and followed. "A glass of that excellent brandy after this night's work will not come amiss," he observed frankly.

In the room von Bertheim pointed to the suggested refreshment and his guest lost no time in helping himself.

"I have to thank you, Captain, for my life."

Ompertz gave a deprecating wave of the arm. "Pfui! 'Twas but a natural *quid pro quo*, my friend," he protested airily.

"It was more than that," the other returned gravely.

"Well," said the soldier, after a second draught, "time is short, and were it not, I have not come hither to bandy words about that. I have a sense of common honour and gratitude—that is nothing to boast of—and am not a midnight bravo, although I admit that an hour ago I must have looked uncommonly like one."

"I can understand the matter," Ludovic assured him with a smile.

"Can you? Then you will understand that you stay here in considerable danger, my enterprising young friend."

Ludovic smiled confidently. "I hope that is past."

"Is it?" the other retorted. "You have a singular confidence, young man, amounting almost to folly. Take my advice. You have had two miraculous escapes. Are you mad enough to fancy that his Excellency, our most noble Chancellor Rollmar, will fail a third time to brush you out of his way?"

"Possibly not," von Bertheim replied dryly. "But I do not think he is likely to try it a third time."

"Ah, you are not going to give him the chance? That's right. I am off now to save my skin. Suppose we go together?"

"With all my heart, Captain," Ludovic laughed. "But I am not ready to start just yet."

"The devil you are not!" Ompertz exclaimed in surprise. "Why, you are not, I take it, such a coxcomb as to trouble about packing your trunks when the trunk that stands on your two legs is likely to have a hole picked in it."

"Hardly," the other laughed. "Still, I can assure you, Captain von Ompertz, that there is no such especial hurry for either of us to take to our heels. I am quite safe, and will take you under my protection."

Ompertz stared and then broke into a laugh. "*Alle Wetter!* But you have no mean opinion of yourself, my brave Lieutenant. To stand man to man, or to a round half dozen, is one thing; to pit oneself against the seven devils united in the scraggy person of our Chancellor is quite another."

"You are right enough, my friend; and I admit that I have run a couple of very foolish risks. But now I do not mean to fight, to oppose myself to this incarnation of the seven devils."

"That's well," Ompertz hastily replied. "Discretion is virtue, even in a soldier, when the odds are against him. Boldness is for the big battalions, as I have learnt often enough. So you are going to retreat and fall back upon a

less dangerous wooing. Good! We may as well go together, at least part of the way."

"You mistake me," von Bertheim said quietly. "I do not intend to leave Waldenthor, at least just yet."

"Then I do," Ompertz exclaimed, catching up his hat and taking a stride towards the door. "I have warned you, and, as it seems, to no purpose. I am sorry, but that your brandy is a good viaticum, to have wasted so much time over the business."

Ludovic made a restraining gesture. "Stay here with me for the next twenty-four hours and we will start together. In the meantime I will guarantee your safety."

The soldier looked at him curiously. "You speak very confidently, young sir; and I am loath to disbelieve you. But you will pardon me if I am inclined to set more store by the practical and cogent evidence of Chancellor Rollmar's ill-will than by the pleasanter but less tangible proofs of Lieutenant von Bertheim's good-will."

"And yet," replied the other, "I could easily convince you." He stopped and seemed to debate with himself, taking a turn across the room. His manner evidently puzzled Ompertz, who stood with his hand on the door, his departure just restrained by curiosity. But the chance of safety by staying seemed too doubtful. "I must wish you farewell, and a safe slipping out of old Rollmar's clutches," he said, pulling open the door.

Ludovic turned. "You will not go?"

"While my feet can touch *terra firma*."

"You will go to your death. Whereas——"

The sound of a horse's hoofs came up the street, and suddenly ceased under their window. Then came a knock at the street door. Ompertz let an oath slip through his teeth. "Too late! I have stayed to my death. But——" He set himself hard, taking his stand in a corner of the room with drawn sword. Von Bertheim laughed but made no remark. Both men kept silence, in which they could hear the door being opened. Next

moment a man's figure appeared in the doorway, and a good-humoured face looked with amused wonder at the room's two occupants and their strangely contrasted attitudes, one loungingly expectant, the other desperately militant.

Checking the visitor's exclamation of surprise, Ludovic went forward with a cry of welcome.

"Anton! You, my dear fellow, at this time of the night! You bring me news?"

"Or I should scarcely have risked finding you so very wide-awake at this hour. Yes; I bring you news, and have ridden hard with it."

He glanced significantly at Ompertz, who, half reassured, had lowered his point.

Von Bertheim answered the look. "My good friend, Captain von Ompertz, who has just rendered me an important service at some risk to himself."

"Then," the newcomer observed dryly, "as we are all friends and it is late, Captain von Ompertz may put his sword to bed."

"If his sword were afraid of late hours," the freelance retorted, as with a laugh he sent the weapon home in its scabbard, "Captain von Ompertz would not have the honour of standing before you at this moment. It is hard to tell friends from foes in this city, and I but waited Lieutenant von Bertheim's word before disguarding."

"Now, Anton, your news. You may speak before our friend," said Ludovic.

"Your uncle has met with an accident, a fall out riding."

"He is dead? No?"

"When I left he was as far through death's door as a man can be to have any chance of drawing back."

"Then there was a chance, Anton?"

He gave a shrug. "He was alive. I did not tarry to hear the result of the putting together of six scientific

craniums. It was enough that the patient had a breakage in his; so I came post-haste to tell you."

"It was what I might have expected of you, Anton. Now I will have a bed made ready for you and——"

Anton opened his eyes. "A bed? My dear friend, you are not going to sleep on it?"

"I cannot start till to-morrow."

"Then I cannot help thinking that you run a grave risk. You have been away over long already."

"The risk is mine, not my uncle's," Von Bertheim returned. "To-morrow evening I will start at latest."

Anton looked serious. "I would not like to answer for the consequences," he said warningly.

"Nor I," chimed in Ompertz. "I have been telling our friend as much for the last half hour. If he stays here till to-morrow I would not like to wager that he survives his uncle with the smash on his skull."

"What keeps you here?" Anton asked.

"Never mind," Ludovic replied.

Ompertz laughed.

CHAPTER XIV

A STRONG MEASURE

DUKE THEODOR wore a troubled face next morning, and its cause stood before him, insistent, uncompromising, in the person of his terrible Chancellor. The pains which his Highness was at to remain wrapped in the cloak of his pompous dignity, in spite of the determined wind of a strong will which kept now fluttering the thin material, now blowing it aside and, occasionally, with a fierce gust threatening to tear it into ribbons, were quite as pitiable as amusing. The measure which Rollmar was, with his usual dogged persistence, forcing upon his sovereign was more than strong. It was startling, and indeed, from the Duke's point of view, heroic. For it amounted, put plainly—and, after but little courtly preamble, the stern old minister so put it—to the imprisonment of his daughter, with a view to keeping her safe till Prince Ludwig should think proper to come and claim her.

"It is preposterous," exclaimed the Duke. "I cannot do it."

"It is essential," retorted Rollmar. "Your Highness must do it."

"The girl will come to her senses without that," said his highness.

"I doubt whether she will come to her senses with it," returned the Chancellor. "Only, once under lock and key, her state of mind will not so much matter."

"I could not consent to such a severe measure," the Duke maintained weakly, "except under the stress of absolute necessity."

"Which necessity has arisen," Rollmar insisted calmly.

"You will convince me of that, Excellency."

"Readily, your Highness. If the facts of these clandestine meetings with this young officer are not sufficient proof of the necessity."

"Why not take—ah'm—preventive measures against him, Baron?" said the Duke, brightening with a plausible argument.

"Your Highness may rest assured that we are doing so," Rollmar answered a little testily.

"You are a long time about it," rejoined the Duke with a suggestion of malicious satisfaction at the idea of his infallible minister's discomfiture. "Surely, Baron, you are not withheld by any scruples on account of the transgressor being a foreigner and a guest?"

There was a very obvious and cheap sneer in this, since it was notorious that Chancellor Rollmar was the last man in Europe to be influenced by such considerations.

But a weak man does not as a rule gain much satisfaction from sneering at a strong one. It would have taken a more masterly brain and a sharper tongue than Duke Theodor's to put Rollmar out of countenance. He simply replied—

"I am quite confident that in such a case any act of punishment which it might be expedient to inflict would be covered by the cloak of your Highness's gracious approval. But, to return to facts, I regret to say I am unable to inform you, sir, at this moment with absolute certainty that my orders have been duly executed."

The Duke raised his eyebrows, still hugging the idea of his master-servant's failure. "How is that, Baron? You have as a rule, I understand, but to point your finger."

The Baron greatly resented the way in which he was being cross-examined about his discomfiture; it was bad enough to realise it, without being worried into confessing it. He had expected the Duke to fall in with his views without opposition or even protest, but as he did not seem inclined to do so, the wily old diplomatist told himself that he must weight his proposal with the story which would force it through as imperative.

"Your Highness knows my aversion to a blunder," he replied impressively. "It was necessary to make quite certain that the finger could point to the right man. It was only last night that I became sure of that. The agent whom I employed to—to put any further scandal out of the question executed his orders to the satisfaction of certain witnesses. But it was with as much astonishment as regret that I learnt this morning that the culprit's body had mysteriously disappeared."

"Indeed!" There was enough sensation in the story to interest the shallow mind of the royal *pocourante*.

"On my way to the palace just now," Rollmar proceeded, in the cold tone of one who drives home an unassailable argument, "I was informed that one of my agents, to whom I had given certain particular instructions, had been found stabbed to death outside the park wall."

"Horrible! Atrocious!" cried the Duke, thinking of his own safety.

"This news," continued the Chancellor, in the same dry voice, "tends to confirm my suspicion of treachery in the person I employed. Your Highness will comprehend," he broke off to interpolate the explanation as a teacher might elucidate a stiff passage in a pupil's reading, "that we cannot command men of unimpeachable integrity to do work of this sort. We rely on their interest rather than their honesty."

"Quite so," said his Highness. "No doubt two

knaves are more useful for certain purposes than one honest man."

"At least they are more available," Rollmar said dryly. "Now, this second episode points to the possibility of our lieutenant being still alive. I say it is possible, though not probable. Still, considering the high interests involved, we cannot afford to ignore the chance. If we have failed, most unexpectedly, to put an end to the affair on one side we are bound to resort to the other. That, your Highness, is the reason why I have every confidence in proposing to you a measure which I feel must be distasteful to your Highness's affection."

The Duke shook his head vaguely. "A doubtful remedy and a great risk, Baron."

"Pardon me, sire. A very certain remedy and a removal of risk."

"Surely not of scandal?" the Duke argued. "A pretty thing to be said that we could only keep our Princess to the match by locking her away from every other man. And a fine prospect for their married happiness."

"Such a state of affairs is not uncommon in royal circles," Rollmar observed, with a little cynical grin. "Where policy of state is concerned small considerations must give way to great. Princess Ruperta will not be the first royal bride who has had to be caged. She represents the price of a kingdom; surely it is wise to keep our treasure under lock and key, away from irresponsible pilferers. But I do not propose, Highness, that our precautions should become known. The Princess's health needs change of air. A few weeks' residence in the Castle of Krell has been prescribed."

The Duke winced. "Krell has an ominous sound," he said smiling feebly. "It need not be Krell."

The minister had evidently made up his mind. "Krell has a dark history," he agreed casually, "which renders it not the liveliest abode in the world, for which reason, your Highness, it seems exactly the place to bring a

wayward young lady to her senses. Moreover, its natural situation renders it an ideal retreat from undesirable Philanders. May I take it that your Highness will give the necessary orders for the Princess's journey tomorrow?"

His Highness seemed, notwithstanding his wise old counsellor's persistence, to have a flat refusal on his lips. However, he checked it, and, rising, took a turn across the room in considerable discomposure. Rollmar stood watching him from beneath his knit brows with a smile of mingled confidence and contempt. The Duke came back. "I cannot consent to this," he declared with a prodigious effort to be and, what was more to the point, to seem resolute; "at least not at this moment. So severe, so drastic a measure must not be taken in a hurry."

"It is," replied the Chancellor with calm sententiousness, "almost invariably, without loss of time that drastic measures have to be taken. The need of such argues urgency."

"That may be," the Duke returned loftily. "But this is a matter wherein my daughter's welfare and happiness are concerned."

"Wherein the welfare and glory of your duchy are involved."

"I am not so sure," said the Duke, abandoning direct argument, "that it is, after all, so great a matter."

"But I am," the minister retorted. "You must pardon me, Highness, if I insist that this alliance is of the very highest consequences. An importance not to be weighed for an instant against the young lady's few days of discontent or even discomfort."

He had changed his tone now and spoke with almost peremptory insistence. The man's strong will and character came out and seemed to beat down in a moment the feeble faculties arrayed against them.

"I repeat," said the Duke, visibly weakening, "there is no such great hurry."

"I regret to take an entirely opposite view to your Highness."

He was firm, and his master knew by experience what his firmness meant. In spite of a long series of abject failures Duke Theodor still persisted in trying an occasional mental fall with the Samson who clasped the pillars of his royal house.

"Prince Ludwig is behaving cavalierly," said the Duke, fishing about for an argument, as a man will prolong a hopeless game of chess. "I have reason to suppose my daughter resents it. He cannot complain, and we may."

"It is not our policy to complain or to give the Beroldsteiners cause for dissatisfaction," the Chancellor returned shortly, as declining to do more than suggest that his view was not to be traversed.

The royal temper began to give way under the minister's somewhat contemptuous persistence. "It simply amounts to this then, Baron. That while Prince Ludwig chooses to prolong his rustication, my daughter is, like Andromeda, to be chained to the rock of Krell to await his pleasure."

"That," said Rollmar, "is one way of describing the position. But the simile scarcely holds good, since our Minotaur comes not to destroy but to enrich."

"And therefore," said the Duke, following out the idea with a weak mind's love of trivialities, "it becomes necessary in our case to slay, not the Minotaur, but Perseus."

Rollmar gave an assenting bow. "Since the Minotaur is assuredly the better match. Andromeda will be chained for her advantage, not against her destruction."

"I do not like chains," the Duke protested.

"They are," said Rollmar, "the unseen insignia of

royalty. I have done my best for many years to keep them from galling your Highness. But if you persist in feeling for them, I can do no more. Perhaps it is as well; I may have done too much already."

There was in this, as the Duke knew well, a covert threat of retirement; and, much as he would have liked to take at his word the determined and exacting old minister, who constituted the most galling of all his fetters, yet for the safety of his kingdom and, what touched him nearer, his own personal security, he dared not. Cold-blooded, cruel, relentless, false when expediency called for deceit, overbearing and contemptuous to the master whom he led by the nose, Chancellor Rollmar was yet honest enough of purpose in his patriotism and his schemes for the aggrandisement of the little kingdom he ruled with so strong a hand.

So Duke Theodor had in the end to give in—which, to save time and trouble, he might well have done at the beginning—and consent that Princess Ruperta should from that very hour be placed under surveillance, and that the next day she should be conducted to the fortress-castle of Krell which had been the prison, and occasionally the grave, of certain persons who from time to time had had the temerity to oppose or offend the implacable Chancellor. The name of Krell had become almost a terror, and Rollmar was wise in choosing it as a retreat eminently adapted to bring the perverse Princess to a sense of obedience to his will.

The Duke had, with an ill grace, given a forced and grudging consent to the arrangement, and the Chancellor, having gained his point by what he considered an exorbitant expenditure of time and patience, was proceeding to mention other and less personal business of state, when word was brought that a despatch-rider had just arrived with important news from Beroldstein.

With an unusual show of eagerness, Rollmar had the despatch brought in.

"Has Prince Ludwig come to light?" the Duke inquired.

"No. But he will," Rollmar answered. "King Josef is dead."

CHAPTER XV

OMPERTZ IS PUZZLED

"I WONDER——"
"Ah!"

"Whether it would be possible to get this letter given to the Princess."

"You wonder, Captain?"

Countess Minna was becoming disdainful. She had come suddenly upon Ompertz in the park, and he had startled her as much by his unexpected question as by his abrupt appearance. But she had quickly recovered herself.

"It is scarcely a matter to speculate about. Give your letter to the first usher or page you see."

She was thrilled with curiosity; but thought she knew better than to show it.

Ompertz laughed. Perhaps he saw inquisitiveness peeping through the mask of dignity. "That would hardly do," he objected. "I should have said, given secretly."

Her curiosity now was intense, nevertheless she contrived to look indignant.

"Then I should say the question you might speculate about is whether the Princess would care to receive it," she returned.

"True enough," he assented heartily, "if it came from so humble a person as myself. I am but a messenger." He paused, as loving to tantalize her. But she gave no

voice to the curiosity that was in her eyes. "It is from Lieutenant von Bertheim."

"Ah!" she made a quick movement, then checked herself. "I suppose," she said sarcastically, "you have been commissioned to bait a trap for the Princess, and are, as usual, dutifully obeying orders."

The thrust called forth a little laugh. "Anyhow, I disobeyed orders pretty thoroughly last night," he returned, "or the hand that wrote this would never have held pen again."

She was still mystified, but her expression softened.

"Will you explain?" she asked, still coldly.

"With pleasure," he replied. "Since I must admit that if ever a man's position stood in need of explanation mine does at the present moment. The lieutenant got me, a stranger, out of a tight corner once. It was not his fault that I got squeezed into it again, and then, unknown to us both, he gave me a chance of slipping out a second time. Then came the part I might all my life have regretted playing, but happily that is spared me. You see, gracious Countess, I did not know who it was I was set to catch, nor did the Chancellor who set me to catch him. But for an opportune moonbeam last night, I might now have been mourning a friend, and Princess Ruperta a lover. But now we are allies; I have gone over, driven at the point of a rascal's dastardly stiletto. Pfui! I am at least a gentleman, and, as such, claim to consort with men of honour—and here is my credential."

With a bow, he held out a sealed note. "I am fortunate to have encountered you, noble Countess."

She took the note, looking at him curiously. "You lay in wait for me," she suggested suspiciously.

"Indeed I did," he answered frankly. "How else should I have hoped to get that all-important message to the Princess? And my lying in ambush had another reason. His Excellency the Chancellor and Captain von OmPERTZ have fallen out. I am in his black books—thick

volumes, I guess; there should be a price on my head; but to repair a wrong against friendship I am content to run the risk."

Minna seemed to be debating a question with herself. Presently she said: "I, in turn, have a letter for the Lieutenant."

He bowed, but, perhaps from innate delicacy, forebore to offer himself as messenger. "It is of great importance," she pursued.

"Yes? Ah!" he laughed. "You were doubtless on your way to the old sun-dial."

She flushed, and the suspicion returned to her face in full force.

"The sun-dial," she repeated. "You know—ah! and I, too, know now how and by whom we have been betrayed."

He gave an assenting sign. "In pursuance of duty, which is, happily, mine no longer."

"Spy!"

"I have been, I blush to confess, for a few hours," he admitted, with a sigh and a rueful face; "but that, you may trust me, is over. The dark cloak never sat comfortably upon me. Many a man of my mind and in my position would have called himself a patriot, but I will not quarrel with the more opprobrious term."

"Once a spy, always a spy," she said resentfully.

Plainly her words cut him and he winced.

"I deserve that," he returned, "and yet in my case it is far from true. I was forced to do a thing I loathed to save my neck, and I swear to you, Countess, by the honour of a soldier, by the Judge, before Whom, if I am caught here, I shall very soon stand, that, had I known the identity of the man I was employed against, had I known the false tongue, the treacherous heart of my employer, I would have gone whistling to my death before I would have sullied my poor hacked shield with the stain of that business."

There was nothing of the spy about him now. His words rang true as her instinct told her. Still she would give in her belief grudgingly.

"I will entrust you with the letter if you are likely to have an opportunity of delivering it," she said, a little more dubiously than was needful. She was not going to forgive too easily. "I presume it will go into your hands, whether I give it to you here or leave it under the sun-dial."

"Assuredly," he agreed cheerfully, ignoring the ungraciousness of her speech. "Since my friend, the Lieutenant, has commissioned me to seek for a letter which might lie there."

"And which he would not trouble to seek himself," she said with a little pout.

"The Lieutenant," he returned, "has heard family news which compels him to leave for Beroldstein to-night."

She went pale. "He leaves to-night?"

"That, I wager, is the purport of the letter I have given you. It is settled, and I accompany him."

The last words were spoken with a touch of triumph, as finally giving the lie to Minna's suspicions, but she seemed too distressed to notice it. "Oh, how unlucky," she exclaimed with a troubled look. "But perhaps after all it does not so much matter. There is no harm in telling you what must soon be no secret. The Princess also takes her departure to-morrow. Not of her free will, far otherwise. We are sent by that hateful Chancellor to the fortress of Krell."

Ompertz opened his grey eyes. "This will be news for the Lieutenant."

"Oh, the Lieutenant," Minna cried ruefully. "I begin to wish we had never seen him. It is all through him that we are to be banished to that terrible, dreary, barbarous Castle of Krell. Ugh! We shall die or go mad with melancholy in a fortnight!"

"The fortress of Krell," said Ompertz with a grimly reminiscent smile. "I know it. It would be a dull place enough for a soldier. But for you and the Princess? No; it is decidedly not a lady's bower."

"And now," she continued petulantly, "when a knight errant is sorely needed, he must needs ride off home—for family reasons. Ah!" she suddenly brightened, "why should not his departure render our horrible exile unnecessary? If only it could be known to the Baron."

"The Baron," Ompertz replied dryly, "should be just now in a state of doubt whether our knight errant has not taken his departure for another world. But, gracious Countess," he continued seriously, "were it not that royal princesses are dangerous game to pursue, since that ugly mastiff, treason, puts his nose in, and spoils the sport, I would suggest a more spirited line of action than a retreat."

"I daresay you would," she retorted, "and get us all imprisoned for life, even if we were lucky enough to keep our heads on our shoulders. A month at Krell will be bad enough."

But the soldier was busy with his plan of action. "You are not there yet," he said; "and, if I might lay a plan, never should be. The sooner I carry this news to our friend the better. If he is of my mind he will not let his lady-love suffer imprisonment for his sake. Pfui! It is worse than cowardly to coerce a woman with fortresses and dungeons. I am more than ever ashamed to think I ever took service under that old dastard. Now, you will keep a sharp eye for one or both of us to-day? We may not come till night-fall, but you shall hear of us before many hours are past, and our Lieutenant's family affairs may go to limbo. Now, am I to have the honour of bearing the letter?"

She could not but hold it out to him. He took it with a bow which had perhaps a touch of mockery in it, at any rate there was a look of amused satisfaction in his face.

"I thank you, gracious Countess," he said, "not only for the letter but for the token that your confidence in this poor soldier is established."

"I hope it may be," she said. Ompertz bowed again and they parted.

The soldier was somewhat surprised on joining von Bertheim and delivering his message to find that the lieutenant did not fall in as eagerly as he had anticipated with a certain heroic plan he had formed on his way to the city. His manifest hesitation was a puzzle to the honest soldier. "Surely, my friend," he remonstrated, "you are never, after all the lady and you have gone through for one another, you are never going to allow that scheming old wretch to pack her off to a forsaken billet like the fortress of Krell? I have seen the place; the sight is enough to make a sexton shudder. To a warm-hearted girl like Princess Ruperta it would mean the devil's own torture. And, once inside those walls, I doubt if you would have so much as a chance of getting sight of her, much less speech with her again till this pitiful laggard, Prince Ludwig, chooses to come and fetch her out."

"I do not propose," Ludovic replied, "to leave the Princess in Krell fortress. I am only considering whether I have not a better, or at least a less risky, plan than yours for getting her out."

"By my faith," said Ompertz, "I have no plan for getting her Highness out of Krell once she is in. That would be beyond my powers of strategy. But she is not there yet, and if we are men she need never be. I tell you, my young friend, there is only one man who, without an army at his back, would get the lady out of Krell; and that is he who would come with an order for release signed, 'Rollmar.'"

"You scarcely understand the situation, my good friend," Von Bertheim said thoughtfully. "But you will

soon. Captain Anton de Gayl has gone to make preparations for our journey to-night."

Ompertz was looking at him uneasily. But he forbore to ask the question which his face and manner suggested. Perhaps the other comprehended this, for he said, "I am going now to the Chancellor."

"To the Chancellor?" the soldier echoed in surprise. "Then the horses your friend is ordering will have a lighter load to-night than he bargains for."

Ludovic put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "I think not, captain. I can take care of myself, even with Chancellor Rollmar."

Ompertz looked at him in wonder and a little admiration. "Well," he muttered as Ludovic went out, "that is either the bravest fellow or the biggest fool I ever met in all my wanderings. They talk of fool's luck; he has had enough of that to prove a regular skinful of folly."

Ludovic took his way to the Chancellor's. As he went along the principal thoroughfare of the city a horseman came clattering down it, meeting him; a man who, by the singularity of his dress as well as by a certain official importance in his manner and pace, stood out from the rest of the traffic. As the rider drew near, Ludovic turned suddenly into a shop he happened to be passing. It was done evidently from an impulse, as though to avoid recognition. He made a trifling purchase almost at hap-hazard, and then pursued his way. He had not gone far when he met his friend Anton de Gayl, who came up with a face of concern.

"You saw that fellow?" von Bertheim asked.

"Ursleur? Yes; and what is more, have spoken to him. He brings serious news."

"Ah! The King——?"

"Is dead."

"Yours prepared me for that. Poor uncle! I am sorry, though we never quite agreed. I wish I had been there."

"Yes," Anton replied gravely. "It would have been well, Prince, for more reasons than one."

"What do you mean, Anton?" the other demanded quickly, noticing the significance in his tone.

"Ursleur has brought Rollmar news which must be bad for you. It seems that your cousin Ferdinand has taken advantage of your absence at this critical moment to declare that you are dead. He has by this probably got himself proclaimed King, seeing that he is the next heir after you."

"You really gather that?"

"I do indeed. Things were in a commotion when Ursleur left, and decidedly shaping that way. I do beseech your Highness to hurry back as fast as horses can take you. It is madness to linger here."

"Yes, it is madness," the new King replied, taking a few agitated steps to and fro. "Madness! and yet ——" He paused in perplexity.

"Once proclaimed, Ferdinand will be difficult to dislodge," Anton pursued. "You know what the mob is, and he has taken care to keep himself popular."

"How my dear cousin will thank me for having played into his hands," the King exclaimed with a short laugh of mortification. "Still, I have not been quite the mad fool he must think me; and how could I foresee my uncle's accident?"

"At least your Highness will not delay your return. An hour now may make the difference of a kingdom."

The King was silent for a moment. "I start to-night."

"To-night?" Anton de Gayl exclaimed in a tone of remonstrance. "And it is yet hardly noon!"

"Nevertheless, I cannot start earlier."

"Under pardon, your Highness, it is madness."

The King smiled. "Perhaps. Yes, yes, it is madness, yet none the less inevitable."

His friend laughed. "I think I can understand," he

said a little bitterly. "For only one thing does a sane man fling away a kingdom."

Ludovic laid his hand affectionately on the other's shoulder. "Your impatience is justified, my dear friend," he said. "I know my interests are yours. But there is another thing, besides love, for which a man may risk his crown, and more, his life; that is honour."

"Honour? Yes. But surely——"

"This is a complicated affair of mine, my dear Anton; and one which this business of my uncle's death and Ferdinand's usurpation have made tenfold more difficult. The very act which calls me home post-haste at the same time makes it impossible to avoid a few hours' delay."

De Gayl could say no more; so they returned together, the King seeming to abandon the intention with which he had set out.

CHAPTER XVI

A DESPERATE EXPEDIENT

THE rest of the day was occupied by the new King in taking anxious thought and counsel. His original purpose of declaring his identity to the Chancellor was now, he felt, a very doubtful expedient. A very black cloud was resting over him, and the crafty old Minister was obviously not the one to look with favour upon men whose positions were insecure. The alliance had been planned and mooted by him for purely political reasons. With the shadow of doubt now lying over those reasons, the expediency of the marriage practically disappeared, at least for the moment. If only Ludovic had declared himself sooner! As it was, a day's delay had been fatal. And here came in the other complicating circumstance which had all along made him withhold the disclosure, the animus and prejudice against the unseen Prince Ludwig which had taken such hold of Ruperta's mind.

After the outbursts of detestation he had not dared to declare himself. Loving her as he did, the risk was too great, for she was still something of an enigma to him; and although one word would have cleared up the situation and smoothed the course of their love, yet the revulsion might have been too great, might,—who knows?—have turned love to hate. At least it would have killed the romance; in which had lain the very joy, the exquisite zest of their love. Ruperta might very naturally

have looked upon the incognito as a trick of the Chancellor's and as such would surely have resented it, and then besides, was romance nothing to Ludovic himself? Was not his wooing her as a simple lieutenant of cavalry, his gaining her love as such, going through perils, facing death for her sake, those hazardous yet sweet adventures crammed into those few delicious days, ten thousand times more heart-stirring than the dull, cut-and-dried mockery of a courtship regulated by etiquette and, its very duration settled by precedent, proceeding tediously to its inevitable end? When he thought, as he did a thousand times a day, of that first kiss, so thrilling in its very unexpectedness, he told himself that that moment had given him a joy which had he come as Prince he never, never could have known. Then as to the adventures, the first at the fortune-teller's, so piquant, the others so perilous yet so delicious, he was young and could enjoy them to the full, never troubling himself as to the risks he ran in the attainment of a joy which he had scarcely dared imagine might ever be his, the finding of love where he had dreaded to meet with coldness and distaste. But that love had seemed so delicately-poised that he feared to try the touch which might shatter it. It was strong enough in opposition and adversity; what might it not turn to when the fraud of his trial was disclosed?

When the scheme of the marriage had been agreed to by the King and Ministers and then, as a natural, though hardly political, necessity, had been mooted to him, he had hated the idea almost as cordially as ever did his destined bride. Expediency counts for little at five-and-twenty, at least in a free and healthy character. When the blood is warm the heart must govern the head, or love will have nothing to say to either. The very fact that these two young people hated the idea of one another was in reality an all-sufficient reason to fall desperately in love with each other if once the air could be cleared of

the mist of expediency and arrangement. Could that ever be? It hung over their hearts like a foul miasma, choking the very life of love. Their aversion to the match was pretty equal; their attitude differed with their sex. Ludwig, with a man's steady common sense, realized the wisdom of the policy and, with bitterness in his heart, bowed to the inevitable which his rank prescribed. Only he vowed he would put off that inevitable as long as possible. The little liberty he enjoyed was dear to him—and he was only twenty-five. Where was the hurry? He was answered that it lay in certain contingencies, death; lusty youth laughs at that; an interloper; the Princess Ruperta might make another match; he fervently hoped she would. That was a reason for, rather than against, delay, he told himself, though he was too wise to utter his thoughts. A Minister who, in a royal alliance, should take love into consideration, would be unworthy of the very strap of his portfolio.

So Ludwig kept his own counsel, blowing neither hot nor cold upon the project, and quietly made preparations for a solitary hunting excursion. The King, his uncle, protested, but could not well deny his heir a month's respite. After all, it would perhaps be no bad thing to show Chancellor Rollmar that they on their side were not exactly jumping at his proposal.

But on the eve of his departure Ludwig heard something which induced him to make some change in the necessary baggage prepared for the expedition. He set out on the appointed day towards the great forest where the sport lay, but it was to pass through that wild district with little harm to fur or feather. He had heard something of the Princess, his intended bride, something which excited his imagination and raised his curiosity into a desire to verify it. So as simple Lieutenant Ludovic von Bertheim he came to Waldenthor, his whereabouts being known to no one but his friend Anton de Gayl, and there, in pursuance of his design, saw the Princess, then by a

lucky chance, as has been related, met her in as romantic a fashion as could be desired. But from that moment he had gradually created a situation where the physical danger of remaining was outweighed by the moral risk of withdrawing, and every day the difficulty intensified; until now, when an unlooked-for crisis had suddenly arisen, his position had become almost untenable. However, as an expedient from this, he, with characteristic boldness, determined on a desperate course of action.

Every shred of the innate chivalry which was his in so large a measure forbade him to allow the Princess to be carried off for his sake a prisoner to the Fortress of Krell while he could lift a hand to prevent it. Rollmar's drastic measure could have been easily obviated had Ludwig still been in the position he had occupied hitherto. As heir to the throne of Drax-Beroldstein, and the object of the Chancellor's darling plan, he would have had but to declare himself, share the secret of his incognito with the Minister, when all would have been easy, and the romance of the wooing might have continued till Rupert's enlightenment was no longer to be dreaded. But now? What would his reception be by that astute old opportunist? Already, no doubt, on the news he had just received, he was substituting Ferdinand for Ludwig as Princess Rupert's bridegroom. Was not the old fox capable even of making things certain and saving possible trouble by continuing to mark him down for destruction, perhaps now with still greater zeal? No; that course, a few hours before so simple, was now ineffective. The bolder and desperate plan must be resorted to no longer for the sake of romance, but from sheer necessity.

Accordingly Captain von Ompertz, much to his satisfaction, was taken into counsel, and a very workable scheme the soldier of fortune had to submit.

At night-fall Ludovic and he made their way secretly into the park and across to the wing of the palace which contained the Princess's apartments, De Gayl having

been left in charge of the travelling carriage outside the park wall. As they approached the palace, Ompertz stopped with a warning gesture and pointed to a figure, just discernible, standing in the shadow of the wall below the Princess's windows. "The old fox has set a guard," he whispered. "I must try impudence to get rid of him, and, if that fails, cold steel. Ugh! Let's hope that won't be needed; it makes me sick to draw in cold blood. Stay here, and for her Highness's sake, do not let him smoke you."

He had begun to go forward now, striding boldly towards the sentinel who, as he drew near, challenged him.

"It is all right, friend," he replied with easy assurance. "You know Captain von Ompertz. I have come by his Excellency's orders to relieve you."

"To relieve me?" the guard repeated dubiously.

"Certainly," Ompertz returned boldly, cleverly refraining from explanations in favour of plausible bluffness. "Chancellor's orders. Is not that enough? If you want reasons, why, you'll find him at home yonder, and can go and ask him, which is more than I care to do."

"Oh, I'm content enough," the other returned, with a gruff laugh. "If you are ordered to relieve me, so much the better night's rest. Good evening."

"Quiet guard, comrade?"

"Seen nothing till you came along."

"Right! Good-night." And the fellow went off.

Ompertz had speculated shrewdly enough upon the chance that his being no longer in Rollmar's service would not be generally known. In this he had proved right, and to the sentry, who knew nothing of the change, the abrupt relief had seemed, after all, quite natural, especially as the Chancellor's orders were notoriously apt to be sudden and inexplicable. The fellow had hardly known why he had been stationed there; beyond what was dictated by a certain native caution, he could not question the order which sent him off duty.

And now Ompertz had a clear stage for the carrying out of his plan. That he was expected by Minna and her mistress was soon evident. The window opened, and, after a short parley, Ompertz ran off to the spot where he had left his companion and returned with him, carrying also a bundle which contained a rope ladder upon which his energies had that afternoon been expended.

To carry the Princess off under the very nose of the keen old Chancellor was daring almost to madness. Yet what else could be done? The alternative was to see her consigned to the prison-castle of Krell till she should consent to marry Ferdinand the Usurper, or Ludwig the Detested, whichever fortune should leave in possession of the kingdom. Would Ruperta ever forgive him if he abandoned her now? Hardly: though his absence were to regain his kingdom. And if he failed in that? Then his state would be hopeless indeed. No. Debate it as he would, he always came back to the conclusion that, as things had stood between them, he could not, dared not, leave her. To run away as King Ludwig, even on so creditable an errand, would be to wake her rudely and for ever from the dream of Lieutenant von Bertheim.

The plan had yet to be proposed to the Princess. She might well draw back at the idea of a step so daring, so perilous, so absolutely mad from her point of view, ignorant as she was of her lover's real position. But her letter of that morning had indicated that her temper was ripe for a desperate attempt at escape from Rollmar's coercion, and on that idea he had acted.

A weighted end of twine was thrown in at the window, and by that the rope ladder was drawn up. When this had been made fast, Ludovic ascended.

"So you have not gone," Ruperta said as he kissed her hand.

"Could I go," he replied, "and leave you, dearest Princess, to bear the punishment I have brought upon

you? Is it true that you are to be taken to Krell?"

"It is true," she answered, with a show of proud resentment, "that we have been ordered to prepare for the journey. But the Baron may find that it is one thing to order and another to be obeyed."

"He sends you to Krell because you will not marry Prince Ludwig?"

She laughed scornfully. "Prince Ludwig? No. The Baron's regard for my feelings is shown by his now having provided another husband for me. Prince Ludwig has suddenly dropped out of the question."

"Ah?"

"Yes," she continued, in all bitterness. "King Josef is dead suddenly. The gallant Ludwig is nowhere to be found; he has had the good sense to efface himself at the thought of marrying me. His cousin Ferdinand has got himself proclaimed King, and as the throne, not the man, is Rollmar's design for me, I am now to think no more of dear Ludwig but to marry Ferdinand, or else spend the rest of my existence in the dungeons of Krell, a warning to those who think to thwart our Chancellor. If I had loved Ludwig as much as I have hated him it would have been all the same."

"So you have seen Rollmar?"

"This afternoon. Yes, and defied him. He seemed to consider any delicacy in announcing the change of bridegrooms quite unnecessary. He was at least frank in his brutality, and had but one word to answer all my objections; Krell. But he shall see."

She spoke with a repressed indignation which seemed bursting for an outlet. He took her hand and they looked into each other's eyes with a mutual understanding.

"Then you will come with me, dearest?" he said.

For a moment she did not answer, but her silence was not of hesitation, her eyes seemed searching into his very soul.

"I can trust you?"

"To my life's end, my love." Her hands were clasped in his now. "But you shall not come with us, you shall not share my fortunes except by your own free will and wish. My love is too true to lead you selfishly away from your greater destiny."

Her eyes were ever looking into his. "I know you are true," she said at last. "Ah! how I wish I could tell—could see the light beyond this darkness." She turned away and leaned against the carved mantel, bowing her head on her crossed arms. So for many seconds they stayed in silence, Minna from the far end of the room watching anxiously for the decision which might mean so much to her.

Ruperta raised her head. "Oh, how I loathe this life!" she cried passionately. "How I hate the cold false hearts that surround me here. Am I never to know anything but indifference, and cold-blooded scheming and deceit? Am I fit for nothing but to be pushed about, joyless and hopeless, on this pitiless old intriguer's chess-board? I will not endure it; I will not. It shall end. He has threatened me. He shall see I am not to be threatened with impunity. If my father is weak, that is no reason why I should submit. I will go from this hated life. Ludovic, I will go with you."

As she turned impulsively towards him, he met her.

"Ruperta," he said, "you must go for love of me, or you will repent this act."

For love of him, of a poor Lieutenant of Cavalry. And she a Princess, only child of a royal house. Truly the plunge was into darkness. Repentance? Could she think of that now? Poor girl, with all her pride and beauty and imperiousness, her fate looked gloomy enough but for the twin stars that seemed to light her way, freedom and love. She put out her hand. "Yes," she replied simply. "I will go for love of you."

Their lips met, then he said, "Come, then, dearest, we have no time to lose."

The hasty preparations for the journey were soon made while the two men waited below, where soon without mishap Ruperta and Minna joined them, and when Ompertz had, as far as possible, removed the evidence of their flight, the four set off warily across the park. They reached the travelling carriage in safety and with no sign of pursuit. It had been arranged that de Gayl should ride on in advance and take counsel with certain friends of Ludovic's, and, if thought advisable, announce his approach.

So he gave up the reins to Ompertz and hurried off towards the city where his horse waited ready saddled. Ompertz whipped up the horses, and so the momentous flight began.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FLIGHT

THE journey which the fugitives had before them was one which necessarily was full of peril and difficulty and, what to Ludovic's interest was worse, delay. For to have taken the direct road from one capital to the other would have been madness. A very few leagues would have brought their flight to an ignominious end. They would have to take an unfrequented route, to travel over by-roads, to avoid towns, to proceed warily, at least till they should have passed the boundary of the Chancellor's net-work of spies. For this purpose chance could not have provided a better pilot than Ompertz. The wandering mercenary knew the whole region fairly well, while his campaigning experience would stand them in good stead. He had a rare eye for catching the sign of unwelcome observation, and knew every trick for avoiding it; moreover he was full of resource and took danger and difficulty less as disagreeable episodes than as matters of course.

All through the long, weary night the journey continued without break or any occurrence to interrupt the monotony of the dark hours. The Princess, now that the step was taken, had resumed her natural composure which was in strong contrast to Minna's feverish anxiety. Their talk was disjointed and inclined to languish, since all three seemed pre-occupied, and the future seemed dark as the night through which they drove. Ludovic's

mind was full of serious thoughts; the stern crisis which had suddenly confronted him was absorbing enough, the more troubling that he could not share with his companions the knowledge of his position. Presently the ladies seemed inclined to sleep. Ludovic made them as comfortable as was possible, and then left them, to take his seat beside Ompertz on the box. The campaigner had plenty to say and was glad of a companion and listener. The stories of his adventures, his remarks on men and things were racy enough, but they were perhaps hardly appreciated by the man who, with pale, resolute face, sat beside him trying to pierce the future, inwardly chafing at the delay their slow progress forced upon him and keenly sensible of the momentous responsibility of the act in which they were engaged.

But at last the long night showed signs of passing; black gave way to dark grey, ever growing lighter till at length the landscape emerged from its shroud and stood half revealed in the chill mist of morning. They were still many miles from the frontier when they stopped at a small town for refreshment and change of horses. But the spirits of the little party rose with the day and at the thought that, so far, their venture was successful. Pursuit was, of course, inevitable, but the chance was that now they had a good many hours' start, and every league they had put between them and Waldenthor would have widened the radius and so increased the difficulty of tracking them. The Princess and Minna could find consolation now for their hardships in exulting in Rollmar's discomfiture. To have defied and checkmated the old fox was delightful to think of; they could imagine his incredulity, his rage; and laughed as they pictured his stormy interview with the Duke.

"Poor father! His dignity will be in sore straits to-day. My only hope is that by the Baron's temper he will be goaded into taking my part. Then all may be well; for, after all, father is Duke, not Rollmar.

It was a poor expectation, Ludovic thought pitifully, that all could be well with the elopement of a Princess with a simple Lieutenant; he longed to reveal to her his true position, but still he dared not, and so long as she continued to see things in a hopeful light, why should he? Ruperta was rejoicing in the unaccustomed sense of freedom, delicious in proportion as it had been so longed for and despaired of; the revelation could well be put off, three words would suffice when the inevitable moment came, and now every hour their partnership in this desperate venture lasted must draw tighter the bond between them. So, masking his own anxieties, he set himself to keep up her spirits, and in this Ompertz's bright, buoyant humour was of great help.

But no time was to be wasted; after a hurried meal they had to start again; at any moment signs of hue and cry might appear, and then their difficulties would be increased a hundred-fold. So they sped on; along broken, jolting roads, sometimes across wild tracks of bare country where road there was none; up tedious hills and down some so steep as to threaten to dash the carriage to destruction, over crazy bridges, through doubtful fords, and sometimes under the depressing canopy of lonely forest tracks; all through the day, which, as it wore on, seemed more wearisome than the night, they kept on their way, wondering, doubting, half repenting, yet ever recurringly hopeful. They were young, and to youth the unknown is delightful; only to age is it a bugbear.

Ompertz never let his spirits flag through the long hours, nor was it his fault if depression came upon the others. He sang merrily, and, when he had a companion, chatted gaily; he was quick of observation, and had a fund of curious knowledge to illustrate nearly every object he pointed out. It was a happy moment when he shouted that they were crossing the frontier, unchallenged, unnoticed, for they had left the road and taken a rough and devious way between the frontier villages. So they

slipped across and pursued their journey with a feeling something like relief now that they were beyond Rollmar's jurisdiction. But when would safety be reached? Could they hope ever to be safe, struggling as they were in the toils of an international policy? Theirs was the security of the mouse with which the cat is playing. But Ruperta would not allow herself to admit this. She was reckless, as strong characters bent on desperate enterprises ever will be. To hesitate, to look back and calculate the chances, when once the boats are burnt, is the last thing a resolute mind will do; madness or not, it must be gone through with; what the future has in store is to be met boldly when it comes, but not anticipated.

When the journey was roughest, the scene most dismal, and Minna's sinking heart forced an exclamation of despair, "It is better than Krell," Ruperta said resolutely, and that seemed enough. Behind her was a prison, or at least the hateful monotony of a coerced, circumscribed existence, in front were liberty and love, room for soul expansion, sympathy, humanity, everything for which she hungered. And so even the drear landscape, the fatigues and terrors of the journey, should never for an instant damp her spirits or make her regret what she had undertaken. For freedom of soul and body she had thrown every other consideration to the winds. If she had fallen from her high estate, smirched her reputation in the eyes of all Europe, she was content so that it freed her from a hateful bondage, a loathed marriage and gave her to the man she loved. And him she trusted with her whole soul, so that she saw no shame in sharing his desperate flight, in facing the world and danger and death with him.

Evening drew on, and no untoward sign had come to rouse their fears. But now the character of their route was changing; they were entering the wild forest and mountainous country which lay like a great rampart

frowning them back from their destination. The high road, upon which they dared not venture, ran miles away south-west, cutting boldly through the forest, and that was rugged and gloomy enough. Ompertz, who knew the district, was confident that he could find his way across by little used roads where they would be practically safe from pursuit. The entry to this gloomy region was enough to send a chill to the travellers' hearts, and, as though to enhance its forbidding characteristics, the wind had begun to rise and moan through the trees and rocky fissures, and the sky to darken with the signs of a coming storm. Depressing as the prospect was, no turning back was to be thought of, the environment had to be ignored and the journey pushed on. Luckily the fresh horses they had lately taken were strong and used to the rough work they had before them. So they went sturdily forward, their driver's spirits seeming in no wise to be damped by the gloom that had surrounded them.

For a while they would drive through the forest so thick and dark as to seem impenetrable, the road strewn with a carpet of moss and pine needles, so that they glided along without noise, the great trees in their serried myriads seeming to close in upon them with an oppressiveness which threatened to shut out air as well as light. The silence was supreme, appalling, in its dominating intensity; it seemed to enforce itself upon every living intruder on its domain, even Ompertz's singing was hushed. Then the wall of trees would open out, the air would grow lighter, fresher, and the track would pass out upon an amphitheatre of towering rocks, grim, frowning, majestic, beyond which the outlet was a defile roofed by the overhanging cliffs so as to resemble the mouth of a cavern. The terrors of that natural tunnel made Minna cover her face with her hands and sob for very despair; Ruperta sat with pale face and compressed lips, keeping her fears at least from utterance. Ludovic leaned forward and touched her hand. She looked up

quickly with a little shiver, then, as her eyes met his, he saw what told him she would be brave to the end. Ah, that end! How far off it was yet, and every tedious minute seemed, instead of bringing it nearer, to push it farther still. Soon the long archway was passed, to be succeeded by the steep ascent of a wooded gorge leading to the very heart of the mountains. Now the storm was beginning to break over them in its fury. The gale howled and roared in the chasms and ravines, sweeping with it the rain in blinding scuds. At one moment it would be light enough just to make out the way, in the next a pall of blackness would cover them so that even the great walls of rock on either side could not be seen. They were forced to halt, and Ompertz, still cheery, dismounted and held counsel with Ludovic.

"We cannot go on through this, Lieutenant," he declared ruefully, "at least not up this track. I know these mountain storms too well, we are comparatively sheltered here, but at every step we take upwards its fury will increase. We must turn aside and make at all hazards for the main road. Yes, it is a risk, but it is either that or staying here all night."

Delay, which could in any way be avoided, was not to be thought of. And, indeed, if they were to take to the high road now, the sooner they struck it the better for their chances of proceeding unmolested. But how were they to make their way out of that rocky maze? Never admitting the difficulty, Ompertz turned the horses and made for a cross road he had noticed some distance back. This proved, when he turned into it, to be rough and almost impossible for a vehicle to traverse. Nothing daunted, Ompertz stuck to his task, and, his horses being willing and sure-footed, the carriage made some progress through the roaring tempest. The track, as Ompertz had expected, led gradually downwards; he was confident that a couple of leagues should bring them

to the road, and then all they would have to fear would be Rollmar's pursuit.

But now their first serious mishap was to occur. The mountain road, which seemed to be getting smoother so that the horses could increase their pace, dipped unexpectedly in its winding course, just as a great squall of wind and rain came roaring over the mountain. Aided by the declivity, the carriage was now rolling down at a dangerous pace. Blinded for the moment by the squall, Ompertz was unable to check or even guide the horses. The carriage swerved from side to side, to crash at last into a projecting corner of rock, the impact splintering a wheel and so bringing their progress to an end. With a cry of discomfiture, Ompertz leapt down and satisfied himself that no one was hurt.

"Unlucky wretch that I am!" he cried in an agony of regret. "I have ruined everything now."

Ludovic, taking in the cause of the accident, was far from blaming him.

"No fault of yours, my friend. Who could hope to drive down such a place in a night like this?"

As the clouds were swept across the sky, alternating darkness penetrable and impenetrable, the rain would cease fitfully, and then pour down and, caught by the wind, sweep horizontally through the gorge. The carriage certainly afforded shelter, but to Ludovic the idea of having to stay there all night was maddening. It seemed the very ruin of their enterprise.

"Stay you with the ladies," said Ompertz, "while I go and reconnoitre."

The idea of finding an inn or another carriage in that wild spot seemed hopeless enough; still, anything was better than inaction.

Chafing with impatience as he was, Ludovic tried to dissuade him. "You can do nothing till the storm passes, except to get a wet skin, my dear Captain."

Ompertz's only argument was to wrap his cloak tightly round him and start off on his forlorn hope.

The accident seemed to have strengthened rather than damped Ruperta's spirit; it was as though nothing could matter now. So they talked almost cheerfully, as the wind shrieked round them and the rain lashed the panes.

Minna was resigned now to her fate; she could laugh with the recklessness of despair; all hope in her was shattered with the wheel. Happily, the storm seemed inclined to abate something of its fury; the rain beat less savagely; the intervals of comparative light lasted longer. It was but a short half hour from Ompertz's departure, when his voice hailing them sent a thrill of expectation to their hearts. In an instant Ludovic was outside. Ompertz clambered breathless down the steep wall of rock.

"There is a great Schloss not a quarter of an hour from here," he cried. "We are in luck! There will at least be shelter and food, perhaps a carriage. Come! The weather is abating. I will show you the place. Man, you cannot leave the ladies, and one a Princess, out here all night, and such a night, with a fine house but a few minutes away," he protested, as he saw Ludovic hesitate.

A short consultation brought them to the conclusion that something must be risked. In that wild, desolate place they were not likely to be recognized, while shelter and rest were urgent, since their progress was stopped. Wrapping the Princess and Minna in their cloaks, the two men helped them up the craggy side of the ravine where they could strike across to the Schloss.

To bring the horses up was a more formidable business, but Ompertz, whose experience had fitted him for coping with most practical difficulties, accomplished this without mishap, and the party pushed forward through the storm. The way was difficult enough; amid rocks and pit-falls, they had in the darkness to proceed with the greatest

care. After nearly an hour's walking, they entered a valley running through a vast pine forest which rose and stretched away on either hand, a weird expanse of impenetrable blackness. At the top of a slight ascent Ompertz cried, "Look!"

They could see, a short way before them, a light shining out of the intense darkness, as through a hole in a black curtain, and when they had gone a few steps further along the now descending road, the passing away of a dark cloud brought dimly out against the sky the turrets of the castle.

CHAPTER XVIII

STRANGE QUARTERS

THE approach to the castle was by a series of terraces connected by a narrow zig-zag road. It stood on a small plateau formed in the wooded hill which rose with almost perpendicular abruptness behind it. Its aspect was curious enough, but the most astounding thing about it was its position, its unexpectedness, and the contrast with its wild surroundings.

As Ludovic and his companions made their way up the winding road their curiosity grew at every step. And the curiosity was not altogether without apprehension.

"The last thing I looked to find in these wilds," Ompertz observed with a puzzled look at the grey silent building. "It is like a fairy tale."

Ludovic was a little anxious, having his responsibility in mind, as to the outcome of the adventure. But such ideas did not seem to trouble Ompertz.

"Our greatest piece of luck," he said, "is that the palace is inhabited. There are plenty of old castles about in these parts, but they have been handed over long ago to the bats and owls. Now, that lighted window bodes a more comfortable reception than a screech and a flutter."

"No doubt it is a shooting-lodge," Ludovic suggested.

"It can be nothing else," Ompertz agreed. "We may

look for a good supper and a night's rest, if not for a carriage."

They had now reached the gateway which led to the entrance door. Here the horses were made fast, and then Ompertz pulled the iron bell-handle that hung in the porch. Scarcely had his hand left it, when the door was thrown open, sending a blinding flood of brightness into the black night, and disclosing a great square hall, hung with trophies and implements of the chase. Two men in quaint liveries stood at the door. As it opened they made way for a third with white hair and beard, who came forward and, with a bow, motioned the travellers to enter. Ludovic in a few words gave the reason of their seeking shelter. Taking it as a matter of course, the old man listened gravely, and then ushering them into a room off the hall, asked them to wait there.

"I will at once inform my master of your arrival," he said deferentially, and so left them.

The four looked at one another in astonishment.

"Well, if this is not an extraordinary place to light upon in the mountains," Ompertz exclaimed, accepting his good fortune with a laugh.

To Ruperta alone, since her experience was narrowed to one phase of life, did their reception seem short of wonderful.

"Everything now," said Ludovic, "depends upon our host; who he is, and whether he is likely to recognize us. Supposing that he does not, you and I, Princess, must pass as brother and sister; Countess Minna and Captain von Ompertz are our friends and travelling companions. Let us hope our incognito may not be suspected."

As he spoke, the door was opened by the old steward, who, with a bow—for those were days of ceremonial—ushered their host into the room. A man as singular as was his dwelling. He seemed the very incarnation of power, with his broad chest, massive throat and strongly

marked features. His hair and beard were black, his complexion swarthy, but his eyes, curiously, were light blue. He was plainly dressed, but a certain dignity of look and movement gave him an air of distinction. He bowed, and greeted the travellers with almost an excess of welcome.

"I should be very sorry to hear of your mishap," he said, "were it not for the pleasure it gives me to be your host to-night."

His voice, Ludovic thought, was the deepest he had ever heard. There was, too, a peculiar sustained vibration in it, like the deep pedal notes of an organ.

"We must consider ourselves very fortunate," Ludovic added, after a word of thanks, "to have found a shelter so splendid and unexpected in this place."

Their host laughed, showing, in contrast to his black beard, a row of dead white teeth. "I do not wonder at your surprise," he said. "But I love a mountain life, its wildness and its sport. At the same time, sense of comfort and luxury in one's home enhances by contrast one's enjoyment of these surroundings."

"Naturally," Ludovic agreed, his opinion of their singular host still hanging in doubt.

"Many people pretend to love a mountain life," the other continued, "but they make themselves woefully uncomfortable, and soon fly back to towns and civilization. I may, perhaps, claim to have the courage of my fancy."

The man's manner was perfect, far more refined than his appearance would have suggested, yet to Ludovic's keen perception there was something about him which made him doubt the depth, the reality of his frankness.

"My servants have probably told you my name. No? It is Irromar, Count Irromar, and this, my principal place of residence, is called the Schloss Teufelswald."

Ludovic accepted the information with a bow, and some inward congratulation that their identity was not likely

to be known to this secluded nobleman. Irromar? The name, though, seemed not unfamiliar.

The Count's deep voice interrupted his attempt to recall it.

"And now, ma" I know whom I have the honour of entertaining?"

Ludovic gave the name he had assumed during his incognito, presenting Ruperta as his sister, changing Minna's title to simple *Fräulein*, and giving Ompertz alone his actual designation. During the introduction the Count's eyes rested rather longer on Ruperta's face than Ludovic liked, and their expression seemed to have something in it which exceeded greeting; but then that was natural. She was a queen among women, and might have come, no doubt, as a revelation to this mountain-dweller.

"We are in haste to push on with our journey," Ludovic said. "If we might beg the loan of a carriage, our horses are still fresh, and——"

The Count made a quick gesture of protest. "It is not to be thought of, my dear sir. As to the carriage, why, the whole of my stable would be at your service, were I cruel enough to allow you to leave my roof this wild night."

"Nevertheless, I should be glad if you would permit us to continue on our way," Ludovic persisted. "We have lost too much time already."

The Count smiled. "Which you will certainly not recover by starting before morning. What, Lieutenant," he added in an easy tone of masterful remonstrance, "it would be nothing less than an outrage to drag these ladies out again into the storm and darkness. They are fatigued enough already, one can see."

Ruperta spoke a word to second Ludovic's urging; but their host would not hear of their departure.

"I am an inexorable host," he laughed. "If you come to my inn, the reckoning I charge is that you make

wise use of the hospitality it affords. Now—ah, Gomer,” he said as the old steward entered, “you have come to tell us that supper is ready. Come, my friends; I shall give myself the pleasure of joining you. The wild weather has given me a second appetite.”

With a deferential bow, he offered his arm to Ruperta. She hesitatingly took it and he led her from the room. The masterful peremptoriness of his insistence was so coated with the good humour of a frank hospitality, that it could not without ungraciousness be withstood, so Ludovic, comforting himself with the reflection that Ruperta and Minna would have a much-needed rest, was forced to accept the delay and submit to his host’s decree.

The Count led the way to a fine square dining hall, where a luxurious supper table had been prepared. The room curiously reflected its owner. In spite of its air of great refinement, there yet seemed flung over it a subtle suggestion of brute strength, almost savagery. Upon the solid oaken floor were strewn rugs made of the skins of bears and wolves. The walls were hung with vivid tapestries on which were worked flamboyant pictures of war and sport almost brutal in their realism. Antlers and swords, armour and sporting weapons were the ornaments of the room; it was essentially the dwelling-place of a strong adventurous personality. But there was the touch of scarcely restrained savagery which seemed, to delicate minds at least, to make the tone of the place repulsive. And, over all, the note of strength; fierce, dominant strength.

The good fare and sparkling wine after the hardships of the long journey soon made the travellers take a more cheerful view of the situation, and put them in a frame of mind to accept with thankfulness the shelter, and with resignation the delay, which this accident had provided. Even Ruperta began to take a manifest interest in her unusual surroundings and could join almost

animatedly in conversation with her host. With a tact, which had in it something of suspicion, the Count forebore to question closely any of the party as to the purpose and extent of their journey, accepting a nebulous explanation on Ompertz's part, who airily accounted for their presence in those mountain wilds by their having missed the high road, with amused toleration of an obvious fiction. Then he adroitly turned the conversation to general topics, talking of war and campaigning to the captain, of sport to Ludovic, of lighter social matters to the ladies. Although he was found keeping his state in that wild spot, the Count soon proved that he was far from being exclusively a dweller with nature. He was familiar with many capitals and their society, and was by no means ignorant of what was going on in the more civilised world beyond his mountain fastness. He happened to mention Rollmar.

"You know the Chancellor?" Ludovic asked.

"Not personally; well enough by reputation, though, and we have corresponded, not too amicably, more than once. Yes, we are well known to one another," the Count laughed grimly. "It is well for one of us, perhaps, that I stand some leagues outside his jurisdiction."

"You would try a fall with him?" Ompertz suggested.

"We should hardly be likely to leave one another in peace. Chancellor Rollmar loves coercion, not to say tyranny, and I—well, I brook no interference with my liberty of will."

There was scarcely need for the statement; the man's determined nature was obvious.

"I am just now amused," he continued, "in watching a little scheme of the old fox's where chance is trying a fall with him. I allude to a matter which must be, at least partially, known to you; the projected marriage

between Princess Ruperta and Prince Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein."

"Ah!" Ludovic bent forward with assumed interest in order to direct the Count's notice from Ruperta. "I suppose not even a possible mutual dislike between the parties will avail against Rollmar's intention there."

The Count laughed. "No. I must give our friend the Chancellor credit for strength of purpose to brush aside such a harmless fly as that. But now he is faced by something more like a difficulty. You have not heard the latest news? No? It is scarcely likely; but I make a point of being well posted. Yes; within the last few days a change has come over the situation which may prove an awkward blow to the old schemer. King Josef has died suddenly from an accident."

"So Prince Ludwig is King?" Ompertz observed.

With a knowing shake of the head the Count drew back his black fringed lips in a smile. "Prince Ludwig, as most of the world knows to its great amusement, has run away and hidden himself to escape the bride Rollmar has ready for him. Why, is his affair; for report speaks of her as a beauty. However, perhaps he did not consider the sugar sufficient to disguise the medicine. Well, the extraordinary part of the affair is this. Uncle Josef dies. Nephew Ludwig, the Unready, is not to be found, consequently Nephew Ferdinand, the Alert, springs up, and, seizing the opportunity, coolly seats himself upon the vacant throne."

A long, low whistle sounded through the room. Ompertz's lips were pursed; he was staring at Ludovic in bewildered suspicion.

Ludovic understood the whistle and the look, but he felt the soldier's circumspection was, after the first shock, to be trusted.

"This must rather complicate the Chancellor's matrimonial plan," he remarked coolly to his host.

"Yes, indeed," the Count laughed. "And I am curi-

ous to see how long it will be before we hear of a transference, by proxy, of the Princess's affections."

"To the reigning cousin?"

"Exactly."

"What would the world say of the Princess who allows her hand to be transferred so casually?" It was Ruperta who put the question.

The Count turned to her with a cynical smile.

"Chancellor Rollmar would probably say, *Fräulein*, that a Princess had no right to her hand or her heart. They are the property of the State, to be disposed of to its best advantage. And this State is represented by Chancellor Rollmar."

"I was not asking for the Chancellor's opinion, but the world's," Ruperta said coldly.

"The world, dear lady, is too selfish to trouble itself about such matters. The world considers that persons in high places have their duties—sometimes very disagreeable ones—to perform. It is, after all, some compensation for other advantages. Moral, do not be a Princess, the world would say with a shrug. No; the only person who is likely to find serious fault with the business is the Princess herself. Always supposing that she has inherited sufficient character and preserved sufficient humanity to feel her position and resent it."

"You mean if she is a woman and not a doll?"

"Exactly. In this particular complication, the Princess may regard the change from the rightful heir to the usurper with the indifference which she doubtless feels for both."

"She may feel none for a third man," Ludovic put in.

The Count gave a shrug. "So much the worse for her and the third man, if Rollmar gets wind of it."

"Poor Princess!" Ruperta commented bitterly.

"You speak," said Ludovic to the Count, "as though the transference of the Princess's hand was inevitable. Putting aside the question of submission to Rollmar's

orders, is it certain that Ferdinand will succeed in keeping the position he has assumed?"

"Possibly not," Irromar answered carelessly. "Although it is always easier to hold than to oust. Ferdinand seems to have the favour of the people, and the mob counts; even Rollmar acknowledges that. Anyhow, I should advise Ludwig to show himself without delay, if, indeed, he is not already a corpse or a hermit."

When supper was over, the Princess and Minna were conducted to their sleeping apartments. About these the keynote of barbaric luxury, which characterised the rest of the house, was entirely absent; the furniture and arrangement of these rooms suggested a woman's supervision, and yet, save a maidservant, they had seen none in the house. However, the travellers were too tired to speculate much on the matter, and were soon asleep.

The two men sat with their host for an hour or more, for his talk was so surprisingly full of information and a certain charm of vigorous expression, that Ludovic, in spite of his anxiety, was held half fascinated by the man, and time went by unheeded.

"If the curiosity of a stranger may be pardoned," Ludovic said, as the Count's contradictory nature increasingly piqued him, "I should tell you that mine is still unsatisfied as to the reason a man like yourself has for living in this strange, wild place. A love of liberty I can understand, but I should have thought this a freedom more suited to an animal than to a man of keen intellect."

A curious look passed over the Count's face, a kind of grim justification of himself, it seemed, against Ludovic's criticism. For, during that instant, the brute, rather than the man, looked out of the untrustworthy eyes.

"You are criticising," he replied, with something of a feline suavity, "a life, a state of existence which you have presumably never tried. Because most men who

dwell far from cities and civilization are clods and almost animals, is that any reason why a thinking, intelligent human being need succumb to such surroundings as these, and become a brainless, mechanical dullard, an observer of nothing higher than vegetation and the weather? I flatter myself I give the lie to that suggestion. I love contrast, and the life I have chosen gives it to me in all its strength, all its stimulating charm. And for the rest, we have all, deny it as we may, something of the animal life in us, the lion, let us say to be complimentary to ourselves, or the eagle. To that side of our nature the rocks, the woods and the wild solitude of the mountains are bound to appeal."

"And the stronger the man," Ompertz observed, "the stronger the animal passion for a wild life."

It was impossible to tell from the Count's face whether he resented the pushing of his argument to the personal limit, but Ludovic, watching him curiously, had an idea that the black beard hid an ugly expression just then.

Irromar laughed. "I am content, at any rate, to be judged as I am," he returned with a sort of careless defiance. "I can keep my wits sharpened here in the mountains, as well as my claws and teeth."

"You can, indeed," Ludovic assented laughingly, careful to smooth over any irritation his companion's tactless observation might have caused. "It is that which, if I may say so, has set me to wondering."

The Count was quite blandly good-humoured now. "Most of us are agreed," he said, "that life is to be enjoyed while we have the power. The great mistake lies in our trying to enjoy it in the same way, as though the *summa voluptas* had been arrived at. The wise man is he who refuses to follow the palling pleasure which satisfies, and in the end dissatisfies, the mob, but maps out a course of pleasure for himself. And, to do that, he must not be afraid of singularity. His method will excite the wonder, more or less respectful, of all but a

few who will recognize that his folly is founded on wisdom. The pleasures of life are limited; they may be counted on the fingers; the ways of pursuing them are practically unlimited. Each generation discovers and adopts new ones; here and there a man anticipates the wisdom of his successors, that is all."

"You seem," Ludovic observed, veiling with a smile a slight feeling of contempt at his host's tone, "you seem to suggest that the most successful pursuit of pleasure is proof of the highest wisdom."

"Is it not?" There was an arrogant confidence in the rejoinder.

"I should be sorry to think so."

The Count's smile was irritatingly pleasant. "And yet I wager that in your heart you think so."

"Indeed?"

"I could give my reasons, but forbear to do so. At least I give you credit for self-deception. And, if I might offer a piece of advice, as an older man who has seen much of the world, I would suggest that the sooner you recognize the wisdom of setting the world's enjoyment before you in the best light the less regret will you have to look forward to. The maze of pleasure has so many paths and windings, each delightful enough when you turn into it, but getting more and more dreary as you go on, till it ends in blankness and disgust. A few paths there are which take some trouble to find and are less inviting than the others, but their interest, on the contrary, increases as we follow them."

"I quite agree with you," Ludovic returned dryly. "It was of such I was thinking. The paths of real pleasure, to which I hardly supposed you meant to allude."

The two men were antagonistic in their natures, and both realized it. But each kept outwardly unruffled.

"I intended to be quite comprehensive," Ironmar laughed, "and to include all pleasures, of every kind."

The proportionate values vary with our dispositions. My highest enjoyment may not be, presumably is not, the same as yours. Captain Ompertz again will possibly differ from us both."

"Mine," responded the soldier with bluff humour, "is a good fair fight, either single-handed or in company."

A smile, significant in its suggestion of a readiness to gratify the other's desire, crossed the Count's face. "You have seen much fighting, Captain?" he inquired casually.

Ompertz had begun a comprehensive answer, when a singular interruption caught Ludovic's attention. The room where they sat was hexagon-shaped, its six walls being hung with tapestry of even more racy design than that of the dining hall. Suddenly a portion of the hangings was silently pushed aside; evidently a door had been opened behind it; and in the dark recess thus formed a woman stood. A woman young, beautiful, magnificently dressed, her breast and hair sparkling with diamonds, as was her white hand that held back the portière. Ludovic, sitting opposite, with his look startled into attention at the unexpected movement, saw all this in the instant that the apparition remained. He saw something more than this. A fearful expression on the woman's face. Beautiful as in repose it could only be, it appeared at that moment distorted into what seemed a blending of all the darker passions. Fear and hate, jealousy, rage, all were there in the parted lips, the glaring eyes, the heaving bosom, the hand trembling on the curtain, and then, over and above all, a look of terrified despair. It was as a glimpse of hell, beauty marred in the sight by utter hatefulness. Then, scarcely realized, it was gone. The sharp turn of the Count's head to see what his guest was looking at was only in time to catch the movement of the tapestry as it dropped into its place. But, whether he guessed or not, his air of easy enter-

tainment was gone, or, at least, continued only by an effort. Ludovic soon rose and bade him good-night, finding it in his heart to wish that they were still sheltering in the broken carriage among the rocks, and had never stumbled upon a place of refuge which, with all its peculiar luxury, was somehow utterly distasteful to him.

"You will like, perhaps, to make an early start," his host said in parting; "and my men shall be ready to go with you to the place where you left your carriage, although I shall be sorry indeed to part with guests as welcome as unexpected."

He said this in a manner quite charming in its graceful cordiality. In spite of an instinctive dislike, Ludovic could not but be interested in the man whose character gave evidence of being so strangely positive in its many sides.

As Ludovic bade Ompertz good-night, the soldier, unseen by their host, bent on his knee and raised the other's hand to his lips.

"Shall I ever hope for pardon, majesty?" he murmured.

Ludovic laid his hand kindly on his shoulder. "It is yours in full, my friend."

CHAPTER XIX

COUNT IRROMAR IN A NEW LIGHT

EARLY next morning Ludovic and Ompertz set out to inspect the wrecked carriage. They were accompanied by an officer of the Count's household, having under him two men carrying tools for the repair, if possible, of the broken wheel. He was a man of forbidding aspect, towards whom both the travellers felt an instinctive distrust, nor was the appearance of the two other men any more prepossessing. But there was no time for Ludovic to concern himself with men's characters as indexed by their faces. With a kingdom and his love hanging on the balance of an hour, the speedy resumption of the journey was all that could be thought of. The storm had passed away; the morning was fresh and fine; scarcely a sign remained of the tempest but its tail of abating wind and scurrying clouds, and, on the ground, the still trickling rain-courses. Seen in the daylight, the castle and its situation seemed yet more extraordinary than by night. Its surroundings were rugged and stern to a degree almost of repulsion; the bluish-black wood, stretching away behind it, formed a suitably mysterious background; while over all was the intense note of lonely, frowning power.

As they went along the valley, with the striking silence only accentuated by the plashing water, the whispered hush of the wind-swept trees, and the occasional cry of a bird, Ludovic tried to get from the Count's man some

idea of his master's mode of life. But the fellow, without being exactly sur'y, was not to be drawn, at least on that subject. His replies were significantly curt, and he would persistently change the conversation by a remark on the scene through which they were passing.

It was not long before they neared the place of the previous night's accident. Ompertz, with a campaigner's faculty for locality, pointed it out to the head man.

"Our carriage lies just over there in the gorge which meets this at an angle yonder. Our shortest way will be to climb over the bank here, and cut across the high ground."

He had already sprung some way up the ascent, when the man called him back. "Better keep along the track here," he said. "The saving in distance is hardly worth the trouble of the climb."

"But it is nothing," Ompertz shouted back. "And it takes us directly to the spot. Time counts for much, and——"

"I tell you you will save nothing in time, Captain," the other insisted, somewhat to Ludovic's surprise, for Ompertz's way was easy enough and obviously shorter. "And then there is a steep descent on the other side. Come! Let us not waste time, but keep on by the easier path."

Almost peremptorily he motioned Ludovic forward. "Come you," he ordered the two workmen. "I think we know the way best, eh, Lukas?"

"Yes, indeed," one of the fellows replied, with a rough laugh. "No time for climbing, if his honour is in a hurry."

Surprised almost into suspicion as he was, Ludovic was too impatient to dispute the matter. "Come, Captain," he called to Ompertz, "we had better keep down here. We must do as we are bidden, it seems."

Ompertz sprang down in no very amiable mood, but

had tact enough to keep his muttered comments to himself.

The head man, whom his subordinates addressed as Gronhartz, now, as they walked on and he had gained his point, became by contrast surprisingly affable. He began to talk almost volubly of the life in the mountains, of sport, of the Count's prowess as a hunter, and recounted several remarkable feats of strength his master had performed. The fellow talked fast, with an evident eagerness to allow no pause in the one-sided conversation. He had certainly said more in the last few minutes than in all the earlier and longer portion of their walk, when, having doubled the rocky angle and turned up the second and steeper gorge, they came in sight of the carriage, standing as they had left it, lopsided, with one axle on the ground.

Now a startling thing happened.

As they came to within about fifty paces of the carriage, Gronhartz suddenly broke off his talk and stopped, turning back to speak to his two men, who were following a few steps behind. With a mere turn of his head, as the man dropped behind, Ludovic hurried on with Ompertz, in natural anxiety to ascertain the extent of the damage. Intent on the broken wheel, Ludovic noticed nothing else till, when within a few yards of the carriage, an exclamation from Ompertz made him look up quickly. Then came the startling whisper—

"There is some one inside!"

A swift glance in response showed Ludovic a movement inside the carriage, but of what he could not make out. Then he turned instinctively to the three men behind him. A slight jutting out of the rocky wall half hid them from where he stood. He made a quick step aside to get them in full view. In the same instant a shot rang out from the carriage, and a bullet touched his shoulder. But for that chance spring to one side it must have gone through him. Then there came a great

cry of rage and surprise from Ompertz, simultaneously with a second shot, and, before Ludovic had quite realized what was happening, his companion had rushed to the carriage, fired his pistol through the window, and then, whipping out his sword, commenced a furious onslaught upon the half visible occupants.

"Treachery! Damnable treachery!" he shouted. "Look to yourself, sire. Shoot those other dogs down. I can manage these fellows."

Already, at his warning, the three men who had accompanied them were rushing forward, the leader with a drawn sword, the others with short cutlasses. For an instant Ludovic was in doubt whether their rush was to be against him, or to oppose what might be some mountain desperadoes who had attacked them from the carriage. But in a moment he was undeceived. As the three men came upon him, there was no mistaking their intention. He gave one glance back to where Ompertz was slashing and thrusting through the carriage window, springing backwards and forwards with what, but for the action's deadly seriousness, would have been antics comical in their intensity. He just had time to see a hand come through the window on the further side, then the door opened, and a ruffianly looking fellow stumbled out with drawn sword. The situation was critical. The reason of the treacherous attack might be a mystery, at all events it was real enough. The three were now closing upon Ludovic; the fourth, who had come out of the carriage, was dodging Ompertz and making to join them. Ludovic saw that another moment's hesitation might mean death. At least one man's life was in his hand, for he had a pistol. He levelled it at the chief, the man called Gronhartz, and shot him through the heart. Seeing him fall, the two with him slackened their pace and wavered. But, encouraged by the shout of the man from the carriage, who was now rushing with uplifted sword upon Ludovic, they came

on again, and for a moment he was in extreme peril. But Ompertz, whose alertness had been checked by a fall on the slippery, uneven ground, was now at hand, coming up just as Ludovic found himself beset by two assailants in front and one behind. Could Ompertz get to him in time, before the three weapons should make their simultaneous thrusts? If not, it seemed that Ludovic must fall. The blades were now within a few feet of him, as he stood desperately swinging his own round, and Ompertz was yet some yards away. With a furious cry like a wild animal's, the soldier rushed madly to the rescue. His great shout gained him a second or two as the man, the most dangerous of the three, who was threatening Ludovic from behind, half turned, and so had to check his rush. Then, seeing Ompertz was not quite so near as he had imagined, he went on again, and coming to close quarters, let drive at Ludovic. By almost miraculous good fortune, the King's sword was sweeping round that way; it just caught and beat aside the deadly thrust. There was no time for a second in the same direction; the ruffian's sword was now needed to meet that of Ompertz. When it came to a fair fight, man to man, he was no match for the soldier either in courage or skill. Ompertz knew that, with the odds still against them, no time was to be wasted in pretty fighting. Rapidly, with a furious onslaught, he drove his man back upon the shelving wall of the ravine, with the result that the fellow stumbled backwards, and, before he could recover himself, the unerring sword passed through him, and he went down with a groan, as Ompertz sprang to the King's assistance.

Barely in time. For the slope, which had just been fatal to one of their enemies, was likewise placing Ludovic in great peril. With two men attacking him, he was forced to keep his back to the rocky wall, and, in consequence, could not spring backwards to avoid the furious double thrusts which were made at him. His

two assailants were fighting desperately, more for their own skins now than for murder. When they saw their intended victim joined by Ompertz, his face like that of an enraged lion, his sword red with the blood of the man who lay a few paces away, where in his death agony he had rolled, such assassins' courage as they had completely failed them; the certainty of their design's failure seemed to paralyze their arms, and, before Ludovic had time to command his forbearance, Ompertz had run them both through, and they were writhing on the ground.

"Speak, you dog!" the soldier cried, holding his point to the throat of the one who seemed to have the more life in him. "Who set you on this devil's work, the Count?"

"The Count, curse him!" the fellow ejaculated with a hideous grimace, and then lay still with the look stamped on his face.

Ompertz turned away with all a soldier's indifference mingled with disgust.

"A narrow escape, sire," he laughed, grimly respectful. "I thank Heaven I was here to help your Highness out of the trap."

"I shall not forget your service if ever fate gives me the power to reward it," Ludovic replied, grasping the soldier's hand. "I wish, though, you had not been so quick with those last two fellows. When we got the advantage, their deaths were not necessary."

"Pardon me, sire," Ompertz insisted deferentially, "it never pays to let a snake go when you have him under your heel. Mercy is thrown away upon such reptiles as those. Worse, it breeds danger, and we have, I fancy, enough to face as it is."

"That is true," Ludovic agreed, with a troubled look. "I seem to have fallen now into a very vortex of difficulty and danger. Still, I may be thankful that luck has so far been on my side, and that Heaven has sent you, my friend, to help me."

They went to the carriage. Inside, lying back in the seat which Ruperta had occupied on their long drive, with a ghastly grin on his ashen face, was a dead man.

"I gave that fellow no chance to take a second aim at your Highness," Ompertz observed grimly. "It was a pretty trap, and I hope we may be well out of it."

The carriage was now to be no more thought of, so, taking from it such of their belongings as might be useful, as well as a spare pistol of the dead man's, they made their way from the place of bloodshed.

"What I cannot understand," Ludovic remarked, as they went cautiously down the gorge, "is the Count's motive in this attempt."

"A precious scoundrel!" Ompertz ejaculated. "I only hope I may have a chance of getting even with him; and we have left the Princess there in his devilish hands."

"That is what troubles me more than anything else," Ludovic replied seriously. "I cannot understand it. Even as it is, I almost incline to doubt whether the Count was the real instigator of this outrage. It is too preposterous."

"I had no liking for the man last night," Ompertz observed.

"Nor had I. Still, what possible harm can we have done him that he should have conceived this vile attempt against us? To murder in cold blood."

Their return through the valley was without further incident. As they drew near the castle, they saw the lounging figure of the Count on one of the lower terraces. He was alone, save for the company of a great wolfhound, with which he was carelessly playing.

"Let him not see us too soon," Ludovic said, and, keeping on the inner edge of the path, they approached the flight of terraces from the side. By this means they came upon their host somewhat suddenly, at a distance of not more than twenty paces. The dog looked round

sharply with a low growl of suspicion, and his master followed the look, expectantly, it seemed, although, when he saw his two guests, he showed no sign of surprise or discomfiture. On the contrary, there was a pleasant smile on his face as he went forward to greet them.

"So, my friends! You have found your carriage, I hope, not past repair. And my men are doing for you all that may be necessary, yes?"

The man's coolness was almost staggering. For a moment Ludovic stared at him astounded, scarcely believing such hypocrisy possible. Then he replied—

"Your men, Count Irromar, have certainly tried to do all that was necessary to prevent our ever journeying again in that carriage or any other."

The Count looked mystified. "I do not understand you, Lieutenant."

"I think you do," returned Ludovic. "The men whom you were kind enough to send with us have just, in conjunction with two other ruffians who lay in wait in our carriage, made a dastardly attempt on our lives."

The Count had preserved his look of mystified inquiry, till the last words changed it to one of serious, then smiling incredulity. "Lieutenant, surely you have prepared a little jest for our breakfast table."

"I fancy," Ompertz, towards whom the Count had glanced in half amused inquiry, put in with bluff impatience, "those five sportsmen who are now lying in the gorge yonder will miss both the jest and the breakfast."

As though failing still to obtain a satisfactory explanation, the Count looked back to Ludovic.

"I am still in the dark. If this is not a jest, will you, sir, kindly tell me what has happened?"

"I have already told you," Ludovic returned sternly. "It is for me to ask you, Count Irromar, whether this abominable attempt was made at your instigation?"

The Count gave a shrug of impatient contempt. "My

instigation?" he echoed, with a show of restrained indignation. "If I understand aright, you come to me with an extraordinary tale of having been attacked by five men, three of them my servants; and you return to the house which has received you, you must allow, with every token of hospitality, and accuse me, your host, of being the author of this unheard-of outrage. Really, my Lieutenant, I hope my ideas of hospitality differ vastly from yours."

"They do," Ludovic retorted dryly. "For I can scarcely believe that these men acted of their own accord."

"Such things have happened," Irromar rejoined suavely, "whether they have taken place to-day or not. I do my best to keep order in my household, but can hardly be held morally responsible for the acts of my servants."

He was so confident, so incredulous, and withal so politely unruffled, that Ludovic found himself doubting whether the attempt, after all, should be laid to his charge. Then the woman's face, which he had seen the night before, rose in his mind, and his mistrust returned in fuller force.

"That the outrage could have been planned without your knowledge, Count," he said resolutely, "is inconceivable."

Irromar smiled indulgently. "I cannot be answerable, either, for the workings of your imagination," he replied, with irritating demur. "Do I understand you, or your friend, to say that the five men you speak of have been killed?"

Ludovic nodded assent. "Luckily. It was our lives or theirs."

The Count looked grave. "I hope you may be able to justify such an extreme measure," he said. "Even in these wilds, we do not hold life so cheap as you military gentlemen seem to suppose. But I should like to

think that this is all a pleasant little fiction on your part."

His indifference was growing more and more exasperating. "I am quite ready to justify what I and my friend have been forced to do in this business," Ludovic returned sternly. "The atrocious attack upon us can never be explained away, and I am at a loss even to guess its motive. But as it seems quite useless to expect sympathy from you in the matter, we will ask you to let us resume our journey without further delay, and to send word to the ladies that we are ready and await them here."

There was a deepening of the curious look in the Count's eyes.

"The ladies?" he repeated, in a tone of bland surprise. "Surely they have been with you. They left the castle, I understand, about half an hour since, and followed you down the valley."

Ludovic's face darkened as the scheme of treachery grew more apparent.

"It is impossible," he objected. "In that case we must have met them. You have been misinformed. May I ask you to let the ladies know that we are waiting to start."

The Count seemed to lose patience. "The ladies are no longer under my roof, I tell you," he insisted. "If you think they have missed their way, I will send out a party to seek them. I can do no more."

Ompertz stood at Ludovic's shoulder. "He is lying," he whispered.

"I think, Count," Ludovic said, "that you are mistaken. The ladies are still within the castle."

Suddenly the Count's face changed, as, somehow, although the actuality was in a greater degree, Ludovic had had an intuition that it would change. Its expression of urbane, if cynical, strength became one of furious rage, which seemed to blaze forth from every feature.

Yet, curiously, for the moment, the outburst was confined to his looks; his speech did not rise above a concentrated but restrained indignation.

"You think? You give me the lie, Herr Lieutenant? I am wondering what will be your next insult to the man who has sheltered and fed you. I tell you the ladies of your party have left my roof. If you choose to doubt me, you may search the castle, but at your peril."

"At our peril, then," Ludovic replied resolutely, "if it must be. I fear we must seek them within doors since——"

"Since you do not choose to believe my word," the Count roared, letting loose his rage now with a vengeance. "You give me the lie!" he continued furiously. "You come here, wretched whipster, begging my hospitality, which I give you in full measure, and you repay it by insult, by worse, according to your own words, by killing my men; bringing me a story such as no one would credit. You must be mad. By heaven, if I find that what you have told me be true, I will have vengeance. The blood of my servants shall not be shed for nothing by wandering madmen. I will kill you as a dangerous pest, so look to yourself, yes, both of you, my Lieutenant and Captain!"

Nothing could exceed the acrimonious fury of this tirade. The polished man of the world, the self-indulgent sportsman, with his suave cynical philosophy, was transformed into a raging animal, snarling upon his spring. The dark face seemed now black with temper, the eyes were blood-shot, the great white teeth significantly shown, all made the face a picture of vicious rage not to be forgotten.

For a moment Ludovic stood nonplussed, hardly knowing how to take the situation. That the Count had some evil scheme in his mind was certain, how it was to be met by two men, with nothing but their courage to back them, was not quite so plain. One awkward feature of the situation was the plausibility behind which the Count had

taken his stand. The position he had assumed had in it certainly less of improbability than the story Ludovic had to tell. Anyhow, in that wild region might was right. The Count's intention to pick a quarrel and so get rid of them was manifest: to argue further or try to convince him would be sheer waste of time. And yet the crisis was so desperate that something had to be done.

As Ludovic paused, hesitating as to the course he should take, Ompertz took a step sturdily forward, and confronted the raging Count with no sign of flinching or perplexity.

"As to madmen," he said bluffly, "you will soon find, Count, on which side the madness lies. At least we are not fools, and I know not what object you may have in trying to make us such. We are not afraid of you or your threats, and that we can fight against odds your ravine yonder bears witness more eloquent than a whole day's boasting."

The Count, who during this speech had eyed Ompertz with a deadly hatred, remarkable for its very unreasonableness, now laughed scornfully.

"You are a fine fellow," he cried, "to afford asylum to. A precious pair of adventurers, I doubt not. I am tired of you; you sicken me with your mad tales and your brag. You can fight, you say? Good; then fight!"

With the word he put a silver whistle to his lips and blew a shrill call. Before the summons ceased to sound men began to make their appearance from all parts of the castle and its approaches. Men of determined, if ruffianly, aspect, most of them in the dress of foresters, all bearing on the left arm the badge of the house they served, and all armed with hunting cutlasses. They came hurrying down the terraces in a business-like manner, and as, at a sign from the Count, they formed up in double line on the platform next above that where he stood, Ludovic told himself that a more truculent array of ruffians he had never set eyes on or even imagined could exist. It took

not many seconds for them to assemble, and during the operation the Count watched them with a set, grim smile. Then he turned to his late guests. The rage had gone from his face now—perhaps it had never been more than skin deep—it had given place to a vicious suavity which was, if anything, more repulsive than the coarser token to his disposition.

"These," he waved his hand towards them, "are but a small part of the force with which I protect myself and my property in these wilds. These are but the number who were within call. No man has ever yet defied me with impunity, and there seems no reason"—here he smiled with evil sarcasm—"why you should succeed where others have failed. But, as you have eaten my bread, I will be somewhat punctilious in observing the laws of hospitality, without enquiring too curiously how far you have disregarded them. Walter!" he called to a man who, standing a little in advance, seemed in command of the posse of retainers. When this fellow, no exception to the general repulsiveness, had come down the Count proceeded. "I give you, Lieutenant von Bertheim and Captain von Ompertz, one hour from now to get clear of my territory. If, after that hour, you are found on it you shall die the death of dogs. You hear? Those are my orders. I have no more to say. I listen to no word. Go!"

He turned abruptly, and walked quickly up the ascent. His two guests were left standing there, with the officer grimly watching them.

CHAPTER XX

A STRANGE ALLY

“**W**E cannot play the lion here ; we must play the fox.”

Ludovic had touched Ompertz on the arm, as the soldier stood defiantly eyeing the captain of the Count's body-guard, and they had turned away down the slope.

“ We can do nothing against that force as we are, and it is madness to think of it. All we can attempt is to set our wits against the Count's.”

“ A damnable villain ! ” Ompertz exclaimed setting his teeth wrathfully.

“ Yes ; we have walked into a hideous trap. Worse, we have taken that divine girl into it with us.”

“ May I be hanged if I understand it,” Ompertz observed, in a mystified tone.

“ I think I do,” Ludovic returned gloomily.

“ You believe the ladies have not left the castle ? ”

“ I am sure of it.” He turned and looked towards the point where the great square tower was just visible above the ravine, and stamped his foot in impotent desperation. “ And I have been calling Fate my friend,” he exclaimed bitterly. “ Of all the hideous tricks she has ever played man, surely this is the most crushing. To lose everything at one stroke by the hand of a brute in human form such as that. To be helpless here, our very lives not worth an hour's purchase, and the Princess——ah, why did we not

let those five fellows kill us just now, and end this misery worse than death?"

"For my part I am just as pleased they did not," Ompertz said dryly; "and it is some satisfaction to know that if we have but an hour or two to live, we have accounted for five of as scurvy a company of scoundrels as ever it has been my luck to encounter. Now, sire, if, as our law is short enough to make time of some account, I may speak under pardon, we have two courses more or less open to us. To run away, or stay and do our best to rescue the ladies. I need hardly ask which, even with a kingdom at stake, your Highness chooses."

The sharp gust of despondency which had swept over Ludovic had soon passed away. "No need, truly," he replied. "If we have but one thing more to do in this world it must be to find the Princess and Countess Minna and get them out of the clutches of this execrable villain. It is a desperate venture, and our lives will, almost surely, pay forfeit for the attempt; but it must be made."

Ompertz had become thoughtful. "It is a poor chance," he said at length; "so desperate that I doubt whether your Highness be justified in taking it. Hear me out, sire," for Ludovic had, by an impatient gesture, imposed silence upon him; "I am far from counselling a policy of cowardice. This rescue cries out to be accomplished; it is the one thing under Heaven to-day which can brook no disregard. But the means, sire? Are you right in almost surely throwing your life away on a forlorn hope? Will you hear my simple plan? That the Princess Ruperta is held a prisoner in the castle of this rascally Count has but to be known abroad, and her rescue is but the question of a regiment's march hither, nay of a word from our late acquaintance, Chancellor Rollmar. Her kidnapper is ignorant of her identity; he little knows what he is doing."

"I doubt whether, did he know it, the matter would not be made worse," Ludovic said. "I seem now to have

heard of this Count Irromar as one who has spent his life in defying all law, national and moral, and has long been at issue with the government to which he should owe allegiance. An outlaw, a very brigand, or I am much mistaken; and his conduct corroborates my suspicion. That we, of all people, should have put our necks under his heel."

"It is like enough," Ompertz replied composedly. "But that the rightful and, I trust, soon reigning King of one State, and the Princess of another, should remain in such a situation is monstrous, inconceivable. Now, sire, my plan is this: Let me stay here alone, using what poor strength and wit I have to find out and free the Princess, while your Highness hurries post-haste back to Rollmar. There can be nothing to fear from him now, this peril will be paramount over every other consideration."

Ludovic took a short turn, thinking over the project. "No," he said at length. "I cannot do it. Your suggestion is praiseworthy enough, my good friend, but I cannot leave Princess Ruperta."

"Not even when your departure would mean her speedy release," the soldier urged; "your staying here, your own death and her condemnation to the lengthened horror, to which from that villain she is certain to be exposed?"

"I cannot go," Ludovic cried in desperation. "How can I leave her like this without even an attempt at rescue?"

"If the Princess," Ompertz said resolutely, "can hear one word from the world outside those walls, she shall know the truth; if not, you may as well be bringing help as staying here to no purpose."

But still the idea of leaving was so repugnant to Ludovic that he would not agree. He proposed to send Ompertz on the errand, but the soldier sturdily refused to leave the King in the midst of that deadly peril. For it was certain enough that the Count's was no idle threat.

It needed no more than the argument of that morning's attack to put his intention beyond a doubt. At length, after a discussion which lasted till the sands of their hour's grace had run out, it was determined that they should, at any risk, make a thorough examination of the castle and its approaches, and try what chance there might be of holding communication with the Princess. To leave that unattempted was impossible, and should their scrutiny promise no success, Ludovic would lose no further time in hurrying off to the nearest place where help could be obtained.

With this settled plan, they set themselves to return to the castle, avoiding any spies or guards who might be on the watch for them. Ompertz, however, was shrewdly of opinion that the Count would regard the idea of their return, at least alone, as too improbable for the need of taking any great precautions, although he might, no doubt, anticipate the bringing of an armed force against him later, when time allowed.

Still, with their lives already forfeit, they had to proceed warily. They were at issue with a man, shrewd, determined and probably as cunning as he was cruel. They decided to make their way to the wooded height above the castle whence they could reconnoitre it from the rear. The climb was tedious enough to their impatient spirits, since it was necessary for safety to approach it by an indirect way. But at length they reached a point of observation several hundred feet above the castle which lay immediately beneath. On the way they had met no signs of any human beings, and had begun to hope that the place might, after all, not be so jealously guarded as they feared. The castle below them stood grey and massive, silent, with no indication of the active, organised life the watchers knew well it contained. They could see now it was a building of considerable size; much greater, in fact, than the front suggested. It ran back at various points into the rock which had, either by nature or by art,

been excavated in a manner that it and the building seemed dove-tailed into each other, the stone projections, natural and constructed, alternating in a strange architectural fashion.

"A rare prison-house our friend the Count has built for his chance guests," Ompertz observed grimly, as, with a soldier's eye, he took in the stronghold. "'Tis well placed, too, strategically, since it commands this raking height, which is rather its strength than, as one might at the first glance suppose, its weak point. Even artillery would be wasted here, unless the devil himself guided the flight of the shot, and he would be more likely to fight on the side of his disciple within."

Cautiously now, they began the descent of the mountain side, taking good care that the sharpest observation from the castle should not detect them. Every few minutes they would pause and reconnoitre shrewdly. The whole place was still as death. The wind had quite died away, the tall pines stood motionless, the thick carpet they shed deadened all footfalls, no living thing crossed their path; it seemed as though the evil genius of the place had infected the very air and frightened away all free life. At length Ludovic and his companion got down to the castle's turrets, unmolested so far. Proceeding now with the greatest circumspection, since every foot they descended increased their peril, they lowered themselves little by little, till they found themselves in face of a wall of smooth rock, pierced about the centre by a small doorway which was approached by a short flight of rough steps. This wall evidently formed the outer side of one of the wedges or dove-tails which ran in alternate fashion in and out of the rock. Whatever light the narrow building got would be from windows on the inner side, since outwardly there were none.

Whispering to Ludovic to watch his keenest, Ompertz crept forward, then up the steps and examined the little door. Evidently nothing was gained by that, for he

turned away presently with a shake of the head. Ludovic stole down and joined him, and they explored further. The various ramifications at the back of the castle seemed to be joined by tunnels cut through the rock. These tunnels were not straight, but zig-zag, evidently so contrived for a purpose, and, from the fact that the explorers could never see more than a few feet in front of them, the examination was attended with the greatest risk.

"This is hopeless," Ludovic said despairingly, at length, when they had crept for some time through the turnings of the rocky fastness. "It seems sheer folly in a place like this to expect that we can light upon Rupert's prison. There may be chambers running far into the rock itself of which we from the outside can know nothing."

"It is a fairly impregnable dwelling-place," Ompertz assented dryly. "With accommodation such as this establishment affords, the man would be a fool if he cannot keep his prisons snug away from observation. It seems to me that the sooner your Highness sets off for more effective help than we can hope to give, the less time will be lost in the Princess's rescue."

To continue in their present position was too perilous. With discovery threatening them every moment, to attempt a leisurely examination of the building was madness. They had noted a winding path with rough steps which seemed to lead up into the woods above.

"Let us go up here and make one more survey," Ludovic said, "and then I will lose no more time in seeking help."

The ascent was fortunately screened from observation by a rocky wall on each side. They lost no time in climbing it, and soon found themselves once more among the trees high above the castle. From where they now stood many of the windows were visible, although they themselves, keeping back in the obscurity of the wood, were tolerably safe from observation. They crept along well

within the fringe of the trees till they could look down upon a court-yard formed in a triangular opening in the rock, and having for its base a wall of the castle. In this several men were moving about, the first signs of the busy life of the place which their reconnoissance had shown them. But this sight advanced them nowise towards the object they sought. That the place was well manned was obvious; in the teeth of such a garrison to hope to get at the prisoners was out of the question. Even Ompertz was without hope.

"There might be a chance at night for finding out something as to their situation," he said dubiously. "But I would not give a kreutzer for it. This is a hard nut, and we shall break our teeth before we crack it."

"You are right, my friend," replied Ludovic; "and I repent now that we have wasted these hours in this vain spying. Hateful as it is to me to turn my back on this brigand's den while Ruperta is there, I will lose no more time in bringing those who shall force it. Though, Heaven knows, I seem poor and powerless enough now."

"I will see your Highness on your way," Ompertz said, "and then return to my post here."

They turned and had ascended but a few paces through the wood when by a common impulse they stopped. A figure stood before them, its presence made known so suddenly that they could not have told whence it had sprung—the figure of a woman. With the first glance of surprise, Ludovic saw that it was she of whom he had caught that painful glimpse in the doorway the night before. But her face was now no more contorted by passion; save for an expression of troubled purpose it was calm enough for its dark, striking beauty to be fully seen. She was dressed in a close-fitting gown of greenish brown cloth the colour of which made her not easily distinguishable among the trees when her face was not seen. With the slight repellent frown on her face, she seemed indeed to be the unpropitious spirit of that wild forest.

For a few moments she and the two men stood confronted in the silence of surprise and doubt. Then she spoke.

"You are seeking someone?"

"Yes," Ludovic answered, eyeing her suspiciously. For the natural thought in both men's minds was that she was there as a spy.

"The ladies who came hither with you last night?" she pursued in the cold, even voice of intense repression. A moment's reflection told Ludovic that there was nothing to be gained by concealment or evasion.

"Yes," he said. "We have been unaccountably separated from them."

She gave a low, harsh laugh. "Unaccountably! You do not know your late host, then. It would have been indeed strange if you had been allowed to leave this place together."

The bitterness with which she spoke was so intense that it seemed to wring the words from her. But it prompted Ludovic to take confidence.

"Then," said he, "my worst fears are true. The ladies have been kidnapped and are imprisoned in the castle.

With a scornful smile she bowed her head in assent.

"And you think, in your simplicity, to get them out. You, who would be killed like a couple of troublesome wasps if you were seen prowling about here."

"Better that prospect, madam, than be the cowards to run away."

She gave a little start of interest at his speech, looking at him steadfastly with a half-sigh of regret. "True; I do not blame you; no woman could. Only I warn you that any hopes you may have of rescue are worse than vain. You would know that if you knew Count Irromar.

"I am sorry to hear it," Ludovic replied simply.

"Yes. What are two men, however brave, however careless of their lives, against Irromar's gang of assassins, against his secret chambers, his locks and bars?"

"I have in me the bold hope," Ludovic said shrewdly, "that you, madam, are willing to help us, since we seek nothing wrong."

She laughed curiously. "You find me a likely traitor?"

Ludovic made a protesting gesture. "I thought not so. Treachery is no name for help in this cause."

"And yet," she rejoined, speaking through her clenched teeth, "it is, above all others, the right word for my help. But if I am a traitor, it is that I have been driven to it. And a traitor's doom would be, perhaps, the most grateful form of the death I have now hourly to expect." She was speaking more to herself than to them. "Yes; I will help you," she continued, suddenly rousing herself. "It was for that I sought you here." She laughed; it was always the same bitter, repellent laugh, a laugh that transformed her beauty into ugliness, drawing, as it were, a film of evil over the comely flesh. "I watched for you," she continued, "from my little window in the tower yonder. I was pretty certain you would come. You are not the first fools, or the last, to dash out your brains against those rocky walls. I saw you. I have a quick eye—to-day." There was a curious significance in the last word. "I will help you. At least, I will let you into the castle and show you where Karl Irromar keeps his fair prisoners. Do not blame me if you find your deaths in place of your ladies."

Ompertz, who had all this time stood silent, although keenly observant, now struck in.

"Under pardon, gracious lady, if I may be permitted a word, I would say that your offer is as handsome as it is unexpected. But before we are free to bless our good genius, we should have some surety that the Count has not chosen an alluring bait to attract us into his stone trap."

The lady flushed. "You may take or reject my offer," she returned haughtily. "Your doubts are perhaps natural enough, still I cannot undertake to remove them."

She half turned away. Ludovic, with a monitory gesture to his companion, took a step after her.

"If we doubt," he protested gently, "it is, as you say, but natural, for we have some experience, unhappily, of the Count's methods and cunning. My comrade is fearful but for me; for himself he has as little fear in trusting you as I for myself. I accept your offer gratefully."

It was the vivid recollection of her face the night before that decided him. It might be a trap, he told himself, but the chances, as he saw them, were against it.

The lady met his look with eyes that had in them a softer expression than he had seen there before; a memory, perhaps it was, of what her character had once been.

"I can scarcely blame you," she replied, as the more sympathetic expression passed away in a hard laugh, "for mistrusting me. After all, it matters very little, since the venture on which you seem determined is such desperate folly. But I will say this for your comfort that, could I trust myself to tell you what I have suffered at the hands of Karl Irromar, you would wish you might be as sure of my ability as of my willingness to help you. The man can be a very fiend when he chooses; I think some of his familiar devils must have raised the storm which drove you here."

She spoke with an intense, despairing bitterness that carried conviction with it. Her story, in all but its details, was plain enough. It was written on her face in those evil lines which surely a splendid misery, rather than nature, had branded there.

"You will help us, then?" Ludovic said.

"Yes," she answered. "But not now. It must be to-night. Be here, at the top of this path, half an hour after night-fall, that is, if reflection allows you to keep your foolhardy intention."

"It can only strengthen it," he replied.

She gave a smile of curiosity. "I think I understand," she murmured.

"You have surprised me into forgetting how grateful I should be," Ludovic said, with gallant earnestness, taking the hand she held towards him and raising it to his lips.

But she gave a sudden little shudder. "No, no!" she cried, snatching back her hand. Then she turned away and went quickly down the steep path.

CHAPTER XXI

THE COUNT AND HIS PRISONERS

WHEN Countess Minna awoke that morning, she had found herself among surroundings which, as she examined them, gave her considerable uneasiness. In her fatigue and the excitement of the night before she had but cursorily noticed the room, merely finding that it was next to the Princess's, and communicated with it. When she rose in the morning she saw that this door, which had over-night been left open, was shut. When she tried it she found it locked; when she called to her mistress no answer was returned. She ran to the other, the outer door of her room; that was locked also. A vague alarm seized her. She looked round and shuddered in an excess of fear at the unprepossessing character of the apartment. At night it had looked fairly comfortable; the grey light of morning now brought out its dismal, almost funereal, sombreness. The great bed resembled a catafalque; its hangings, like the rest in the room, were black, scarcely relieved by a purple line of device. The few pictures were portraits, all of singularly forbidding aspect, and the whole tone of the apartment bore out the note of gloom. She went to the window and threw back the curtains; as she did so almost starting back in dismay. The outlook was upon a sheer wall of hewn rock, as gloomy and depressing as was the room. The place had the aspect of a prison, and it seemed

very much as though it were really one as far as she was concerned.

"Worse than Krell," she gasped, as she turned away and began to dress herself. When this was done, she tried the doors again, shaking and knocking at them, but without getting any response. Her fears now increased every moment; she thought of all the tales she had heard of wild robber nobles and their death-traps; were they not nicely caught there? The very circumstance of their flight had made their rescue or any knowledge of their imprisonment an impossibility. Had they not, she asked herself miserably, by their own folly destroyed every clue to their whereabouts, and so unwittingly contrived their disappearance from the face of the earth? Yes, she persuaded herself, they had fallen into hands which would take care that they were never seen or heard of more.

Just as she was working herself into a perfect frenzy of fear and despair, the door suddenly opened, and a maid of somewhat repellent aspect brought in breakfast. This she set down without speaking a word or, indeed, showing any particular consciousness of the other's presence, and was leaving the room, when Minna sprang after her and asked her anxiously why the door between the rooms had been locked. To this the girl merely shook her head and answered, "I do not know."

"But I wish to see the other lady at once," Minna protested. "Will you either unlock that door or show me the way to her room?"

Again the maid shook her head. "I may not. I know nothing," was her unconvincing reply.

"Then," exclaimed Minna, pushing forward to the door, "I will go myself and find the way. I will not stay—ah!"

She started back with a little cry. At the door stood a man; none other than the Count.

He came in with a smile, which did not tend to restore

Minna's confidence. The maid went out, and the door was shut again.

"I hope you rested well, Fräulein?"

The set smile gave the lie to the words. Obviously he did not expect to hear of a pleasant night's rest.

"I slept well, Count. I was dead tired," she answered, keeping back her trepidation.

"Ah, to be sure. You had a long, fatiguing journey of how many hours—I forget?"

The question was put with just enough insinuation to put the girl on her guard.

"I could not tell you; I lost count of them," she replied, forcing a laugh.

"Ah, yes; no doubt, and you missed your way, of course. You would hardly take notice of time."

There was something behind the man's casual questions. A purpose lurked there. He let it peep out, possibly because he hardly thought concealment worth while. But Minna's wits, as we have seen, were apt to become sharpened and steadied by a critical situation. They awaited now with apprehensive curiosity the declaration, surely coming, of the Count's purpose. His eyes were fixed on her in a way which made her feel uncomfortable. It was like the gaze of a snake. She had never thought that light blue eyes could give forth such a sinister expression.

"The Lieutenant and his friend have gone off to look after the broken carriage," Irromar said.

"Ah!" Minna brightened at the idea of getting away.

"A hopeless errand, I fear."

His tone made her look up into his face with a start. It seemed to have far more of fate in it than was concerned with a wrecked carriage.

But she tried not to betray the sinking at her heart.

"You can doubtless put us in the way of procuring another carriage," she suggested.

"Perhaps. I am not sure."

There was no mistaking the half threat in his tone. She looked at him now in scarcely disguised apprehension.

"You are not sure?" she repeated.

His ferine teeth gleamed out in an inscrutable smile. "Hardly. I have certain doubts as to how far my help should be given. Doubts, pardon me, as to the correctness of the story the Lieutenant told me last night. Yes. Now you, Fräulein, may perhaps find it expedient to declare the truth.

It was an ugly invitation, more especially in the way it was given. So this was the purpose of the interview, Minna thought; but to what ultimate end? What right had this man, in exchange for a night's food and shelter, to be inquisitorial?

"I can tell you," she replied, "nothing more than you have already heard."

"Nothing nearer the truth?"

"No, indeed."

"I think you can, Fräulein."

"You are wrong, Count."

"No. Nor in thinking that you will."

Nothing could exceed the masterful tenacity of his manner. It was as though he knew everything, and was merely trying to convict his guest of deceit.

"I can tell you nothing nearer the truth," Minna persisted. With so great an issue at stake, she could think of nothing but what she conceived to be her duty.

The Count's eyes never left her, but she bore their searching bravely.

"You can tell me," he said, very deliberately, "that the Lieutenant and Fräulein von Bertheim, if that be her name, are not brother and sister."

"I cannot," she returned evasively.

"You may not?"

"May not?" she laughed, not very successfully. "There is no compulsion, that I know of."

"There is," he retorted significantly, "to speak the truth."

In spite of her fears, his insistence began to irritate her. "If you know better than I, Count, my testimony can scarcely be necessary.

"Perhaps not," he returned brusquely; "still I mean to have it."

He had risen, and now stood over her. The sense of the man's immense power seemed to dominate her, but she thought of Ruperta, and determined the secret should not be drawn from her.

"You will not tell me the truth," he continued, "without forcing me to extort it."

"Extort it?" Desperation gave her courage, and her scornful smile was unforced.

He nodded. "You will do well to listen to reason, Fräulein. I am asking no great matter; simply inviting you to tell me the truth, which I already suspect to practical certainty.

"If you are uncivil enough to doubt a lady's word——" she began weakly. He interrupted her by a contemptuous laugh.

"I have no time to waste in bandying words further," he exclaimed impatiently. "I hoped you would not force me to use my power, but if you will be so foolishly obstinate——"

He moved to the window and flung back the curtain. The wall of rock rose sheer and grey within a few feet, blocking out all view of the sky, and mocking the sight with a poor wedge of daylight which served but to illuminate its black monotony.

"That is all the outside world you will see till you have told me the truth," Irromar said quietly.

Repressing the shudder which the prospect induced, she turned quickly to him. "Then we are prisoners?"

He smiled uncompromisingly. "Scarcely that, as yet. But you may be."

"You will keep us here at your peril, Count," she flared out, her indignation getting the better of her fear.

"It may be," he returned, as smiling at a child's threat. "I will take the risk."

"It may be greater than——" she stopped. In the stress of resentment her tongue was outstripping her judgment.

"Yes?" he asked, with his irritating, probing smile.

"Then this is why I have been locked in my room," she went on, covering the slip with an excess of indignation. "And is Fräulein von Bertheim a prisoner too under this hospitable roof?"

"It depends upon you," he answered.

A defiant reply was at her lips, but she thought better and checked it. Boldness and obstinacy were here manifestly out of place; wit alone could avail. After all, since the Count clearly suspected the relationship between Ludovic and Ruperta, where was the point in keeping up a deception which was already hardly one? So long as the great secret of their real identities remained unguessed, the other did not seem to matter much. Since Minna had hoodwinked Rollmar she had acquired confidence in her native wit. What she wanted now was to get back to Ruperta; this solitary confinement and state of alarm were more than she felt she could bear.

"And if I tell you the truth of what you want to know?" she asked, with a fine show of reluctance.

"Then you will be free."

She made a shrewd grimace. "A vast difference between one word and another."

"A great difference to you," he agreed.

"What can it matter to you?"

"I am a man who likes to have his own way at any cost."

"Cost to your neighbour, your guest." She could not forego the obvious retort.

"To my guest, even," he returned, with a shrug, "when I suspect my hospitality has been abused."

She laughed. "It is, then, a heinous sin in these regions to assume a relationship?"

"I do not allow deception under my roof, if I can detect it," he replied bluffly. "Now, your companions; tell me. They are no more brother and sister than are you and I?"

"No."

"They are lovers?"

"You can see that as well as I."

He tapped his foot impatiently. "Tell me."

"Then—yes."

"Of course; it is clear. They are eloping?"

"Under circumstances of infinite respectability, Count," she said archly.

He laughed. "Ah, yes; of course. Far be it from me to suggest the contrary. Thank you, Fräulein. That is all I wanted to know, unless there is anything more you wish to add."

"Only a request that, now I have satisfied your curiosity, I may be at liberty to join my friend and prepare for our departure."

"Certainly, when your carriage is ready." With a cunning smile, he moved to the door and went out quickly, closing it behind him. When she tried to follow him she found she was again a prisoner.

The Count had bolted the door behind him, and now went straight to the room that had been allotted to the Princess. A very different apartment it was from poor Minna's; for, whereas that was repulsively dismal and terrifying, Ruperta's lodging was luxuriously furnished and pleasant in the highest degree. The windows looked out upon the valley and the stretch of pine-clad mountains beyond; there was no hint of a possible prison in those cheerful rooms, the appointments of which went, in their delicate refinement, far beyond anything which that part of the castle they had seen the night before would have led one to expect. The apartment was as magnificent as anything Ruperta had known in her father's

palace; but for her anxiety to be on the way again she could have delighted in the pleasant rest and change of scene. As yet no shadow of a suspicion of her host's intentions had come to her. She was awaiting with some impatience Minna's appearance to join her half finished breakfast, when she was told that the Count asked permission to pay his respects to her. He came in, another man from him who had just left Minna. He was now the very perfection of grave courtesy; the attentive host, the open-hearted sportsman.

"I had expected the Lieutenant and his friend back before this," he observed, after their greeting. "It is long since they went off to inspect the broken carriage."

"You do not think harm can have come to them?" Ruperta suggested, noticing his serious expression.

"That," he replied, "is scarcely possible, since I sent several of my men with them."

She was reassured by his words. "That is well. No doubt they will soon be ready to start."

"You are in great haste to leave us, Fräulein?"

"Not that, Count. But we have a long journey before us."

"Ah, yes. It is sad that the pleasure of one must be the pain of another."

The words were gravely spoken; tinged, perhaps, with a rather deeper feeling than a mere phrase of compliment. Ruperta laughed pleasantly. Her new life and its adventures were breaking down her old reserve.

"Hardly pain, I should hope, Count. Although parting is seldom a matter of indifference; it involves either relief or regret."

"And here? Relief, you cannot deny it, on one side; regret, I cordially own it, on the other."

"Relief cannot be our feeling at leaving one who has been our friend in distress," she objected. "Who has known how to turn a vexatious delay into a pleasant visit."

"If," he said, bending forward insinuatingly and speaking in a more earnest tone, "I have succeeded in doing that, I am splendidly rewarded. You, Fräulein, in your distress and anxiety, cannot realize the brightness with which this accident, unlucky and yet lucky, has illuminated my rude, lonely existence."

She seemed to think he had expressed himself warmly enough, for she replied almost coldly, "It is surely your own choice, this rude, lonely life as you call it. Although I dare say an occasional guest makes an agreeable change."

The blue eyes were fixed on her in a curious admiration. With glorious beauty such as hers, coldness could only be provocative to a man of the Count's temperament.

"May I see Fräulein Minna?" she asked. "It is surely time we made ready for leaving."

"Scarcely, I hope," he returned, and something in his manner seemed to suggest to her that he might design, she knew not why, to delay their departure.

"Please, Count," she continued, more insistently, "let me find the Fräulein, or send her to me."

A man came running out of the wood towards the castle.

"Ah, here comes one of my men," the Count said. "He evidently brings news. I will see what it is."

He hastened from the room, leaving Ruperta in a vaguely uneasy state of mind. Very soon he returned, and she saw in his face, as somehow she had anticipated, that he had unpleasant news to give her.

"I am placed in an awkward position," he said, in reply to her look of inquiry. "My man, who accompanied the Lieutenant and his friend, tells me a story so strange that I hesitate to make it known to you."

"Please tell me at once—everything," Ruperta said with compressed lips.

He affected to hesitate for a moment, then said, "It

appears that the Lieutenant and Captain von Ompertz have, for some unaccountable reason, taken their departure without you."

She stared at him for a few moments as though not realizing the news.

"Gone without us?" she said, with quiet incredulity.

He made a grave sign of confirmation. "I fear it is but too true," he maintained sympathetically. "They have gone, under circumstances which leave, I fear, no doubt as to their intention."

The notion was so preposterous that it scarcely moved her.

"I cannot believe it," she said calmly. But the darker idea of a sinister intent prompting the falsehood began to take shape in her mind.

"Will you hear what my man has to say?" Irromar asked.

"No," she answered, with a cold repression that seemed almost indifference. "At least, not now. I will wait, since there seems yet no chance of our departure."

He bowed. "I shall be but too honoured and happy to keep you as my guest," he said, unchecked by her significantly averted face. "Will you pardon my boldness, Fräulein, if I must tell you that, should we unhappily find that your friends have deserted you, you have found another, a devoted friend, in Karl Irromar?"

She returned no answer, gave no sign even that she heard him, and he judged it wise to leave her.

CHAPTER XXII

AN UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENT

NIGHT, falling over the dark forest, effectually hid Ludovic and Ompertz, who were making their stealthy way towards the trysting-place. All through the dragging hours of that weary afternoon they had lain hidden among the rocks, having before them the curtain of a great clump of brushwood. Once they saw a couple of armed men stroll by: they wore the Count's heraldic badge on their arms, and, by their manner, were evidently a patrol keeping a quiet look-out. Possibly, however, with the idea that their chief's late guests were hardly likely to have run the risk of lingering so near the castle, the guard made no serious search for them, contenting themselves with a casual sharp watch. That was the only incident to break the monotony of those anxious hours; it served to give the lurkers assurance that their presence was hardly expected.

Never was the falling dusk so welcome as on that evening. When it was safely dark, the two stole out, eager to be about their desperate attempt. For to entertain the idea that they two, even with the lady's help, could rescue the prisoners from a man so powerful, so resourceful, so wary as the Count, and get them away from his prison-like stronghold, was, could they have considered it soberly, nothing short of madness. But, in truth, their situation was as desperate as was their venture; they could not view it dispassionately if they would.

Action was imperative; delay intolerable; the danger and distress of the prisoners was bound to increase every moment they remained in that robber's den.

The two men had but half a mile to go from their hiding-place to the rendezvous, but the nature of the ground they traversed, and the need of extreme caution left little remaining of the half-hour after night-fall which was their appointed time. Save for a few dim streaks of moonlight which filtered through the trees, the wood was perplexingly dark as they crept through it. Stealing along like marauding panthers, they arrived at length, without incident or alarm, at the meeting-place. No one was there. Standing close to a great tree, they waited for their guide's appearance. Scarcely a sound broke the stillness, as they stood there, keenly watchful; the slightest movement or rustle seemed intensified in that black atmosphere of silence; the two men drew their very breaths cautiously, as they strained their eyes into the darkness for the first glimpse of an abnormal movement. But none came to end their motionless impatience. Minutes passed without any indication that the tryst was to be kept. At last, when the appointed time was well past, Ludovic whispered to his companion, "Let us go forward. She may be here waiting for us, as we are for her."

Ompertz nodded and they crept out warily into the path. All was still; ahead of them they could see a dull haze of light rising, evidently from the lighted windows of the castle below. Suddenly Ompertz put out his hand and touched Ludovic, then pointed forwards to an object which his trained eye had detected dimly outlined against the faint light. Surely it was the figure of a woman standing beside the path. So the lady had been waiting for them all the while. Vexed at their short-sighted caution, which had lost so much time, Ludovic went quickly forward. She stood quietly, so motionless that they wondered she did not turn at their approach. She had taken

her position rather unwisely, Ompertz thought, at a spot where a thin shaft of moonlight pierced the trees, bringing her figure into a somewhat dangerous prominence. As Ludovic came within a few paces of her, he saw it was she whom they looked for: his hand was raised in the act of salutation, when suddenly, as though shot, he stopped with a great start and a half cry.

"Ompertz! Great Heaven! Look!" he cried hoarsely under his breath.

In an instant Ompertz by a quick stride was at his shoulder. The two men peered forward, with apprehensive intentness, at the girl's figure. Then, as by a common impulse, they turned and looked at each other aghast. Next moment, Ompertz, to whom familiarity with horrors had given a quicker recovery of nerve and power of action, sprang forward to the motionless figure. Only to recoil with a deep exclamation of wrath and abhorrence. As he turned and his eyes met Ludovic's, the King saw in them the answer to his gasped question.

"She is dead?"

Ompertz nodded and came close to him, seizing his arm.

"Dead? Yes. Foully murdered for this business. The man is a devil incarnate."

Without another word, for the horror was to appalling for speech, they went a step forward and saw what the deed had been.

The body of the girl was cunningly lashed to the trunk of a young tree which had been cut down to about the height of her head, and so formed a support to keep her in an erect posture. The attitude was natural, and, from a few paces off, the deception was perfect. But now the grey face, strangely handsome even in its ghastliness, set off in horrible contrast by the rich dress and jewels which, sparkling in the moonlight, mocked the lustreless eyes, was so awful that more than the first glance at it was unendurable. As Ludovic averted his head in an agony

of impotent rage and sorrow, Ompertz caught his arm and said in his ear.

"His vengeance will not stop here, sire."

Ludovic roused himself from the horror that seemed to deprive him of all thought, save one, and understood his meaning.

"We cannot go," he said desperately, "after that." He pointed with a shudder to the Tragedy. "Now less than ever, since we know——"

He stopped, for Ompertz had made a warning gesture, and now turned his head, listening intently. There was a stealthy rustle in the trees; while they listened in doubt, it increased and seemed to come from all sides. Then suddenly came a low cry of command, followed, without pause, by a noise as of men rushing swiftly and stealthily upon them.

"Look out, sire," Ompertz cried. "It is a trap! We are surrounded."

As he spoke, dark forms appeared, running upon them through the trees. With a soldier's readiness to meet and make the best of a surprise, Ompertz had whipped out his pistols, and fired two quick shots at the foremost of the advancing figures.

"Follow me, sire," he exclaimed. "We must cut our way through, or we are dead men. It is our only chance. Keep your fire for the moment. I fancy I have accounted for two. This is our best way."

As he spoke, he sprang forward into the wood, over the bodies of the two men whom his shots had brought down. Ludovic followed, sword and pistol in hand. There were angry cries behind them, but, for the moment, they got a slight start, having broken through the ring of their assailants at the point where Ompertz's shots had made an opening. Keeping arm to arm, the two ran on as fast as the thick wood allowed them, dodging the trees which stood in the way of their progress, stumbling, falling, bruising themselves against the trunks, which seemed to

advance against them in the darkness, yet always, as the shouts told them, keeping ahead of their pursuers. It was a grim hunt, with death a certainty if they were taken.

"Mad fool that I was to let you stay, sire," Ompertz groaned, desperately making his way through the hindering trees, with every thought concentrated on securing his companion's safety, none troubling as to his own.

"I care nothing for my life now," Ludovic returned, with set teeth; "only to get Ruperta from the clutches of that murdering devil. At least, he will buy my death at a price beyond his fancy."

As they kept on, hope came to Ompertz that they might, after all, in that great thick woodland, succeed in evading their pursuers. The voices behind them were no longer heard. They stopped and listened, uncertain whether to conclude that the attack had been completely baffled, or the human beasts of prey were but preparing for a second spring upon them. They soon, however, became unpleasantly aware that their good luck was but imaginary. Suddenly there came from all around them, as it seemed, a quick succession of low, signalling cries.

"We are surrounded again," Ludovic said. "Fools that we were to think we had got clear."

"They have not taken us yet, sire," Ompertz replied, as, with grim determination on his face, he finished the reloading of his discharged pistols. "We will account for a few, I hope, of these villains before the end comes, if it be so near. Happily, though they outnumber us ten to one or more, yet their master does not seem to trust them with fire-arms. Now, sire, let us make a rush for it. Once out of the wood—Hah! what is that? By St. Hubert, they have lights for the better hunting of us down."

It was true enough. From various points in the circle round them, came, first a dull glow; then, as the brightness increased, an occasional flash was seen, as in the

narrowing ring of their pursuers, the torches were thrust to and fro.

"At least their lights serve to show us where they are and where they are not," Ompertz observed, with a laugh. "Yonder seems a likely place to break through. Come, sire."

Without a moment's further hesitation they made a dash at a spot where the interval between the lights seemed greatest. Their assailants had evidently not thought them so near; as the two burst upon them out of the darkness, which was intensified beyond the radius of light given by the glaring torches, the Count's men gave a cry of surprise, and sprang at them. But before a blow could be struck, two pistol shots rang out, the lights the men held made the aim easy to their own undoing; next instant there were two bodies on the ground and two torches crackling half-extinguished on the wood's spiky carpet. Then came a shout, a hunting cry, only more charged with rage and thirst for blood, followed by a rush, as the whole band converged and made for the track of the two who were now running for their lives. The pursuers had the advantage, since they could see their way; the glare of the lights came ever nearer, the savage cries of the man-hunters sounded closer, the fugitives could hear the desperate panting of the men, straining every nerve to come up with them, and make a speedy end to the night's work.

"God, sire, that you should die like this!" Ompertz cried with a great sob, as the two, ever shoulder to shoulder, ran their losing race with despair. Truly the end seemed close now, as close as the exultant, panting ruffians at their heels. "That I cannot give the hounds my life for yours!" The words were wrung from him in that great agony of regret.

"It is well, my faithful friend," Ludovic replied, as he put forth his hand and gave the other's arm a friendly grasp. "You have played your part nobly. I am only

sorry that I have led so brave a spirit to a trap like this."

For all seemed over now. Save for the satisfaction of the act, it was hardly worth while to turn and send another brace of those hireling murderers to their death. But the last stand had to come, that it was but a few seconds away each of the two felt in his heart. They would not fall flying, but with faces set to their foes. They could run only till the foremost cutlass came within striking distance. It was but a very few feet away now. Ludovic had the word on his lips, when there came an exclamation from Ompertz; a gasp, it sounded, of grim satisfaction. The scene had suddenly changed, so unexpectedly, that it seemed like magic. The thick wood had abruptly come to an end, they were in open ground, in comparative light, since the sky showed clear above them.

"Thank Heaven we shall die in the open," Ompertz ejaculated, as they ran down the sloping approach from the wood. "It is some comfort to get another look at Heaven, whether our journey lie that way or the opposite."

The Count's men, like beasts of prey, were now tearing after them, their eagerness being probably stimulated by a shrewd idea of the way in which their chief would be likely to recognize their failure.

On the open ground it was soon apparent that there was no chance of distancing the pursuit.

"We must turn and face them," Ludovic said to his companion, as, turning his head, he caught sight of the flash of a blade almost within reach of his head.

"No, no, sire; for Heaven's sake keep on a little longer," the soldier gasped. "We may escape them yet. If only we can get to the rocks yonder. Ah!"

The foremost of their pursuers, an ill-visaged, swarthy giant, was now within striking distance of Ludovic. Ompertz, running for his life, was yet keeping an eye on the fellow over his shoulder, watching for the moment when the blade would be raised for the stroke. As he

spoke the last words, he caught the glint of the steel over Ludovic's head. He turned and checked his pace just enough to get a certain aim, then fired, and, with a roar, the great fellow pitched heels over head. The next man was perhaps ten paces farther behind; the fugitives had a renewed start. The rocks, for which they were making, were now quite near.

"Courage, sire! Keep on at your fastest," Ompertz cried in his desperate hope. "We may make a stand against them yet. With our pistols we may hold these rocks—ah, no! by the everlasting thunder, they have trapped us after all!"

His quick eye had seen that, from an opening in the dark hill-side, a body of horsemen had suddenly appeared, filing out on the open ground across which the two had nearly made their way. As they emerged from the path, they deployed with military smartness, and so formed an almost invincible barrier between the fugitives and the rocks for which they were making.

"We are nicely caught between two fires, now," Ompertz exclaimed with a groan.

"Never mind; let us fight while we can," Ludovic returned.

They had slackened their pace, seeing the hopelessness of getting clear away to the rocks. The Count's men from behind were now upon them.

"We must try to fight our way back to the wood," Ompertz cried desperately. "We have no chance here against horsemen."

There was little chance enough for them any way; it was merely a question of how many lives they could exact in payment for their own.

Seeing them halt and turn, the men gave a cry of exultant blood-thirstiness, and rushed to close in upon them. "Shoot, sire," said Ompertz, "and let us have one the fewer to deal with."

Ludovic's pistol rang out, and a man fell. Ompertz

pointed his empty pistol, and, seeing their comrade go down, the assailants checked their onslaught. But the Count was coming up behind them; his furious tones sounded above the rest, and the stimulus of that dominant spirit put an end to hesitation. If death was a risk in front, it was a certainty behind them, and the Count had a peculiarly unpleasant lethal prescription for cowards and blunderers. So the men were fain to attack, in spite of the ugly little barrel which swept round upon them as they spread out to surround the doomed pair.

But now the precious fire could no longer be husbanded. Ompertz, hemmed in, shot down with his second pistol the most aggressive of their adversaries. The man's fall caused but a momentary backward sway of the on-coming force, which was now ready to attack at all points, and make short and final work of their victims. As the great body dropped with a half-choked cry and a thud, his companions, with savage cries of rage, brandished their weapons and made a simultaneous rush to close in.

Back to back the two doomed men stood, grimly determined to make as many lives as possible pay for their own, since all else but death was out of the question. Ludovic was now utterly possessed by the spirit of blind, despairing recklessness. The sense of the terrible irony of his fate had passed from his mind. All hope was gone; one after the other his kingdom and his love had been snatched from him, and now Fate's shears were already meeting on the thread of his life. So free of the world and all it held dear for him did he feel, that he could laugh and enjoy the desperate excitement of that last struggle, where, since he could not win, he could delight in reducing his opponent's gain. In those terrible moments, when the murdering swords and villainous faces with eyes drunk with the lust for slaughter pressed round him, he fought with a coolness and effect which forced from him a laugh at his own success. He could not have imagined their holding out like that. He heard, above the guttural

hubbub, the Count's voice roaring, as much, it seemed, in impatient annoyance as encouragement. Then from Ompertz behind him came a loud exclamation of triumph, a shout as gaily jubilant as a man might give on a successful stroke at tennis, but it meant that another of the Count's ruffians had been accounted for, and the debt which their lives were to pay was growing.

But almost immediately afterwards the soldier gave a different cry.

"Ah! I am done for!"

Instantly Ludovic turned to see his comrade practically disarmed, his uplifted hand grasped but the hilt of his shattered sword.

"My beauty! Gone at last, and on these swine," he cried ruefully.

There was but one sword now to defend two men. Ompertz, with a despairing oath, hurled the sword-hilt full in the face of the man who was about to thrust at him. The fellow's intention was naturally checked by the blow which took him fairly on the mouth, and, profiting by the moment's respite, Ompertz made a vigorous spring out of the immediate reach of his assailants, but instead of trying to escape rushed desperately towards the Count.

"Count!" he cried, throwing out his arms, "kill me, as you please, but save him. He is Prince Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein."

He stopped, for, with an exclamation of angry surprise, the Count had turned from him and ran forward, peering through the semi-darkness at a sight which had suddenly attracted him. For a moment Ompertz supposed that it was Ludovic who was the object of his attention, and he, too, ran back to where he had left him, fearing that he must by now have fallen. To his surprise he found Ludovic standing alone; his assailants had drawn away from him, and were facing, in, as it seemed, some consternation, the mounted troops which had now advanced

from the shadow of the rocks into the open. The sudden cessation in the attack was incomprehensible to both men. But, taking in the situation as he found it, Ompertz lost no time in snatching a cutlass from one of the dead men, and then sprang to the King's side.

"Are you hurt, sire?"

Before Ludovic could answer, the horsemen were upon them.

"We shall have less chance now than ever," Ompertz muttered, preparing, all the same, to return the expected assault.

But a strange thing happened. The on-coming horsemen halted within a few paces, showing no intention of immediate attack. Then the Count's strong voice was heard challenging them, and at the words a ray of hope broke in upon Ompertz's mind.

"What is the matter? What devil's game are you playing here by night?" a sharp voice called out.

"By the God of wonders, they are strangers," Ompertz ejaculated, in sanguine astonishment.

The Count flung back a fierce reply to the inquiry.

"What business is that of yours? Resume your way, and leave what does not concern you."

"Are you Count Irromar?" the same sharp voice demanded.

"I am Count Irromar," came the reply; "and answerable to no man for what happens in my own domain."

"I am not equally sure of that," the other returned, in a nettled tone.

"I will brook no interference from you or any other man," the Count shouted, resentfully. "Will you please to pass on your way? You are off your road here."

Any further rejoinder from the leader of the troop was prevented by a cry of discovery from one of his own men who was nearest to Ludovic and Ompertz.

"Captain! Captain! We are in luck at last. Here are the very men we are seeking!"

"What!" The leader put his horse forward, and came up eagerly to where the two men stood. As he reined up, they both recognised him; Udo Rollmar.

"So I have caught you at last, my dashing Lieutenant," Udo exclaimed, viciously exultant. "Before I hang you on the nearest tree, you will tell me——"

"What has become of the Princess," Ludovic said. "I will tell you at once. She is a prisoner in that castle."

"Ah, you vile traitor—you——"

Ludovic went up close to his horse's head. "I will tell you something more," he began. Udo's horse made a slight plunge forward, and Ludovic put his hand on the bridle. Udo raised his sword.

"Back! you dog," he cried savagely. "Keep your distance, or——"

The other made a gesture of warning. "I am King Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein," he said quietly.

Udo's hand fell, and he stared at Ludovic for some moments, as scarcely realizing the announcement. At length he said:

"The King of Drax-Beroldstein's name is Ferdinand."

"Not the rightful king's. I tell you I am he. I came to your Court, incognito, for an obvious reason, to add some romance to your father's matrimonial projects. You comprehend? Now, an unfortunate series of accidents has hampered my plans. All that can be explained later. The Princess must be our first consideration. That ruffian yonder, Count Irromar, is, I tell you, keeping her prisoner there."

Udo's face hardly exhibited the satisfaction and respect which might have been expected from the disclosure of Ludovic's identity. A scowl of forced suspicion rested there; manifestly he was not relishing the part fate had cast him for in that romance. His father's sentiments in the business differed, as has been seen, considerably from his own. The feeling uppermost in his mind just then was probably intense regret that he had arrived on the

scene in time to interfere in the Count's amiable intentions towards his rival. But there he was, and the situation was to be accepted as he found it. He could hardly take upon himself to complete the Count's work. The Chancellor would surely find out any such treachery, and was not the man to spare, in such a case, even his own son. For, in spite of the incredulity which he thought proper to assume, something told Captain Udo that this was the veritable Prince Ludovic. The adventure, now that he was given the clue to it, was plausible enough, and it was obvious from his demeanor that the man who stood before him was something more than a lying lieutenant.

"This is all very fine and mysterious," he said ungraciously, still affecting a doubt he scarcely felt, "and I do not understand it."

"It is of no consequence," Ludovic returned with dignity. "You will, at least, not disbelieve me when I tell you that the Princess Ruperta is in that castle, held prisoner, and, for aught I know, in dire peril. As to who or what I am, that can be determined later. But no time must be lost in rescuing her Highness from that villain's clutches."

There was hardly room even to pretend to doubt that statement, and Udo resumed action, nothing loath, perhaps, to play the rescuer and get Ruperta out of the danger into which her lover had brought her. He wheeled his horse and cantered back to the spot whence the Count had addressed him, only to find that during his colloquy with Ludovic, the Count and most of his party had disappeared.

CHAPTER XXIII

ROLLMAR'S POLICY

THIS manœuvre of the Count's gave little surprise to Ludovic, although he felt angry with himself for not having foreseen it, and, indeed, in letting Irromar slip away, the chance of speedily rescuing the Princess had been lost. Udo Rollmar showed his double discomfiture pretty plainly. However, he did not let his moodiness interfere with his activity. He sent several of his men in pursuit of the Count's party, but with little success. The wooded and rocky approach to the back of the castle hampered the movement of men unfamiliar with the winding paths and concealed passages; consequently the result of the pursuit was the capture of but one man. This fellow laughed defiantly when Udo ordered him to gain admittance for them into the castle as the alternative to his being strung up on the nearest tree.

"A pleasant draught that," he laughed sturdily, "set against the dose our Count would have ready for me."

"Nonsense, man," Udo said impatiently; "you will have our protection, and as for the Count——"

The fellow interrupted him with a still more derisive laugh. "The Count? You think, with your score of men, to come to a reckoning with him? Why, Captain, you might as soon try to catch in your hand a bird flying past you. Ten times your force would never get inside that castle, were the Count minded to keep you out:

and if you did get in you would never get out again."

"We shall see," Udo returned, scornfully confident.

"You do not know my master," said the man.

"I know him," Udo retorted, "for a pestilent, defiant law-breaker. A villain who, for this piece of work, will at last meet the hangman who has long been expecting him."

The prisoner's only reply was an incredulous laugh.

"Do you mean to show us how to gain entrance to the castle?" Udo demanded impatiently.

"Not I," the fellow answered. "And you may thank me for refusing to do you that ill service."

Udo raised his hand, as though about to order him to be strung up; then, with a change of intention, he had him bound and attached to one of his troopers.

"It is as well to keep the fellow alive for a while," he said to Ludovic; "we may find a use for him."

"In my opinion the ugly scoundrel is certainly right, Captain," Ompertz observed. "This is no place to account for with a handful of men. It could defy you at that rate till doomsday."

By his ill-humoured face, Udo did not seem to accept the opinion very graciously. But he was fain to consult with Ludovic upon the position in which they found themselves. His manner towards the King was dubiously deferential, suggesting that he would have liked to discredit him were he only certain of his ground.

"You may accept the fellow's word," Ludovic said, ignoring Udo's manner in his paramount anxiety for Ruperta. "It would, I am sure, be absolutely useless to attempt to force our way into the place. And here, from behind, is its least vulnerable point. I fear all we can do is to go round to the front and threaten or, at least, parley with the Count."

Udo's aggrieved expression seemed, as doubtless it was intended, to make the most of the undeniable fact that it was by the extravagant act of Ludovic himself—king or

no king—that the Princess had fallen into this trap. However, he accepted his advice, and the party made their way round into the narrow valley and so up to the front of the castle.

Here, with sound of bugle and peremptory hammering at the great door, the master was summoned and entrance demanded. But not a sign of impression was or seemed likely to be made. After a while, however, a grating in the door was uncovered, and a man-servant, after blandly inquiring the reason of the summons, intimated that if the leaders of the party would come forward alone, having drawn off their men down into the valley, the Count, his master, might be graciously pleased to speak with them from a window. As this seemed the best chance they might expect, Udo ordered down his men, and remained on the highest terrace with Ludovic and Omperetz. For many minutes they stood there cooling their impatience. Presently, however, a light appeared at a window above their heads; it was opened, and at it the Count appeared with a face of bland, protesting surprise.

"May I ask the reason of this somewhat rude summons?" he inquired. "What do you gentlemen want?"

"We want," Udo answered, "the ladies whom you are keeping prisoners."

The Count raised his eyebrows in still further surprise. "Really, gentlemen," he replied, "I am at a loss to understand you. You are making, knowingly or in ignorance, an extraordinary mistake. I know nothing of any ladies in my house."

His affectation of ignorance, while it rather non-plussed Captain Rollmar, exasperated Ludovic, to whom it was disagreeably familiar.

"A truce to this nonsense and pretence, Count," he cried. "We are not here to discuss whether these ladies are in your keeping or not, but to demand their instant release."

The light held by the Count's face showed an ugly

wave that for an instant ruffled its blandness. "You demand, sir?" he returned, with a slight indication of sternness behind his suavity. "You are as bold to ask me for what I have not got, as unreasonable to disturb my peace at this time of night."

His cool lying was a shield which no words could pierce.

"Then," said Udo hotly, "you refuse to give up these ladies?"

"Were any ladies under the protection of my poor roof," Irromar replied, with maddening calmness, "I should certainly refuse to deliver them over to what I am almost forced to regard as a band of drunken marauders."

"You will rue this insolence before many hours are past," Udo cried angrily. "So far from being a drunken marauder, I am Captain Udo von Rollmar, of his Highness Duke Theodor of Waldavia's Bodyguard of Cavalry. My father is Chancellor, Baron von Rollmar, and——"

"And your friends?" The words came snapped out with pointed, malicious intent, "and your friends, who have, in return for my hospitality, murdered my poor servants in cold blood, and attempted my own life—who may they be?"

"I am one," Ludovic retorted, "who possesses the power to have you hanged, and I will not rest till I have done so."

The Count laughed. "And you expect me to open my gates to you?"

"Certainly, to let out the two ladies."

The Count made a gesture and a grimace of protest.

"This trick shall not serve you, Count, for long," Ludovic said, checking his almost ungovernable anger in his anxiety for the Princess. "Let me tell you, the ladies you keep prisoners are of high rank, and you will detain them another hour at your peril."

The Count smiled as resentfully indulgent. "Were

the facts as you state them, I should be tempted to ask how ladies of high rank come to be travelling in this wild country in company with a pair of common swashbucklers, if the expression may be allowed me."

This touched Ompertz, who had hitherto stood by chafing in silence. "You will pay for that, my sweet Count, on my own as well as this gentleman's account, if ever I come within striking distance of you."

"It is late," Irromar observed, with his terrible coolness, "and chilly for listening to insane threats and bluster. I have already indulged you too long. I can only repeat that I have no knowledge of the ladies whom you say you seek. Now, Captain, I bid you good-night, and if I might venture to add a word of advice, it would be that you will do well to dissociate yourself forthwith from your two disreputable companions. You are a young man, and—what is strange in your father's son—you seem easily gullible. Good-night."

The window was closed with a bang, and the light disappeared. The three men turned and descended to one of the lower terraces, where they held a short consultation. Each was convinced that an attempt with that handful of men to force a way into the stronghold was not to be thought of, and Ludovic, gladly as he would have headed such a forlorn hope, was obliged to bow to its impracticability. The plan quickly decided on was that he and Udo Rollmar should ride back post-haste to Waldenthor, inform the Chancellor of what had happened, and return with a force sufficient to overcome and compel Count Irromar to surrender. Meanwhile the men already there would remain on the watch under the command of Ompertz.

No sooner was this plan settled, than the two, taking the freshest of the horses, started off on their long ride. Tedious as it was, especially to Ludovic's impatience, the journey was by a much shorter route than that by which he had come. When once, after a couple of leagues'

rough riding, they gained the high road the way was smooth and direct enough. There was no comparison between their galloping progress and that of the heavy jolting coach in which the ill-fated elopement had been made. The day was yet young when the two drew bridle before the Chancellerie at Waldenthor, and Udo, ushering his companion into a salon, went to announce to his father the strange result of his quest.

Ludovic had taken, insensible of fatigue, but a few turns of the apartment in his restless impatience, when the Chancellor came in.

Rollmar's greeting manner was a study, a curious blending of half-doubting deference and slightly contemptuous protest. But his keen scrutiny of the young man, a revising, as it were, under transformed circumstances, of a previous observation and opinion, seemed to satisfy him. His first words, as he bowed, lower than to an equal, yet not so profoundly as to an assured sovereign, were characteristic.

"And I, Adrian Rollmar, never even suspected it."

There was a slightly self-reproachful smile on his thin lips as he motioned Ludovic to a seat and stood before him, keenly revolving this unexpected phase of the situation.

"You have heard, Baron, about the Princess?" Ludovic asked rapidly.

Rollmar bowed assent. "A pretty pass your Highness has brought your romance to."

He seemed not to care to ask or require any personal confirmation of the news of Ludovic's identity; he was shrewd and skilful enough to see that the man before him was undoubtedly royal, although, owing, perhaps, to his keenness having been diverted to another scent, what seemed now so obvious had previously escaped his notice. His remark had a touch of humour which softened its reproach.

"No one," Ludovic replied, "naturally can regret this

unlooked-for turn more terribly than I. The matter now is to rescue the Princess, and without a moment's unnecessary delay."

To his impatience, Rollmar's deliberation was provoking. "Ah! Unfortunately, as we hear, sire, you are not in a position to effect the rescue yourself."

For the moment Ludovic did not take his meaning. "By myself? Assuredly not. You must know this Count Irromar and his stronghold, Baron. It will require a considerable force to bring him to capitulate."

Rollmar nodded agreement. "Which your Highness cannot provide."

"From Beroldstein? No." Ludovic replied, a little awkwardly. "I fear I have trouble there to face."

"Ah!" The Chancellor's ejaculation was expressive, inscrutably so, in the suggestion of busy thought lying behind it. "You would have done better, sire, to have looked after your crown, and left your love affair in my hands."

"Better, perhaps, for my crown," the Prince returned, with as much of a smile as his anxiety would permit. "But, with all deference to your skill, Baron, not so well in the other matter."

"At least," the Chancellor rejoined, "the present situation would have been avoided."

"One can hardly hope to fight against chance," Ludovic said, somewhat impatiently; "of that I have been the sport lately. My uncle's fatal accident, my cousin's usurpation, and our stumbling into Count Irromar's den, were hardly to be anticipated. But if fate has led me into these hard knocks, it has in other respects marvellously stood my friend, even—" he smiled—"against you, Baron."

Rollmar returned the smile a little dubiously. "Under pardon, sire, your luck can scarcely be said to justify your madness. Romance is, no doubt, a pretty plaything, but too gimcrack for the stern game of state-craft. I am an

old man, sire, and you a very young one; let me tell you in confidence from my experience that the greater part of my forty years' work has been correcting the mistakes and combating the absurdities of those whom I have served. Happily—for I am tired of it—it does not fall to me to help you to regain what you have lost.”

Ludovic rose impatiently. “But it is just for that, Baron, I have ridden here post-haste through the night.”

“To help you——?” The old minister looked uncompromisingly aghast.

“Yes,” Ludovic exclaimed impetuously, “to rescue the Princess. While we are talking here——”

Rollmar's expression had changed into a grim smile. “The romantic still uppermost,” he said, his contemptuous amusement getting the better of his deference. “I thought you referred to the recovery of your kingdom.”

“What is that to me while Ruperta is perhaps in deadly peril, or worse?”

“Ah, true.” The old man's coolness and deliberation were exasperating. “That is my business, and you may trust me to set about it without delay.”

“I might be excused for doubting your promptness, Baron.”

“*Festina lente.* But I am not insensible of the criticalness of the Princess's position. An armed detachment is already under orders, and I myself start for the Schloss Teufelswald within the hour.”

“You, Baron?” Ludovic started in surprise.

“Even I,” Rollman answered quietly. “This precious Count Irromar, whom you have stumbled upon, is well known to me, at least by reputation, and is no ordinary man. He unites in himself, as your Highness may have discovered, the cunning of the serpent with the ferocity of the wolf. Our troops may oppose the latter quality; it is to meet the former that I propose to myself a disagreeable journey.”

“Then,” said Ludovic, “we travel together.”

"So far," Rollmar replied, a little stiffly, "as the road to Beroldstein is the way to Schloss Teufelswald."

Ludovic paused in his quick stride towards the door, and stared at him. "Naturally, Baron, I go with you to the Schloss Teufelswald."

Rollmar pursed his lips, as he remained standing by the fireplace. "I would advise you, sire, to let the settlement of your position at Beroldstein be your first care."

"You would, Baron?"

"Unless, that is, you are inclined, as is hardly likely, to a man of your spirit, to let things be as they are."

Ludovic flushed hotly. "I give up my crown to Ferdinand, or to any other man? Surely, Baron, either I misunderstand you, or you are joking."

"Far from joking, sire. I was only thinking," he added dryly, "of the trouble such a course would save."

"None of my seeking," Ludovic returned. "Either I am the rightful King of Drax-Beroldstein, or I am not."

"*Les absents*," said the Baron calmly, "*ont toujours tort*."

This was more than Ludovic could endure. "Enough!" he exclaimed impatiently. "I will not discuss the point with you. Now, let us start for Teufelswald without further delay."

Rollmar eyed him curiously. "I am ready. But for your Majesty it would be best to go first to Beroldstein."

Ludovic walked up to him. "What do you mean, Baron?" he demanded.

The Chancellor gave a shrug. "Simply that you may with confidence leave the rescue of the Princess in our hands."

"Indeed!" Ludovic retorted. "And what, think you, would her opinion be of the man who, having brought her into this strait, rode away and left her deliverance to others?"

Rollmar smiled, masking, obviously, his underlying intent. "Women are unreasonable. It need matter little

to our Princess, once she is free, by whose agency her liberty is gained. More. Perhaps, all things considered, it would be as well that you should not appear as her deliverer."

"Why not, pray?" Ludovic demanded warmly, as an inkling of the other's drift dawned upon him.

Rollmar met him with steady eyes. "If the romance is to come to an end, the sooner it is over the better."

The meaning was plain now. "True," Ludovic returned, with the restraint of a settled determination. "But the romance will end only with our deaths."

Rollmar seemed to accept the words as a challenge. His still deferential manner was in curious contrast to the dictatorial purport of his speech. But then his daily interviews with his master had made the blending of the two quite natural.

"Speaking in the name of my master, Duke Theodor," he said, "the question of the alliance between Princess Ruperta and yourself is a closed one. It was naturally and necessarily contingent on certain events and circumstances. With the romance of your love affair I have no concern, except to express a passing regret that it should have indirectly upset a promising intention. But your Majesty will understand that, from his Highness Duke Theodor's point of view, the proposed alliance of our Princess was not with Ludwig Hassenburg, but with Ludwig, King, or at least Heir Apparent of Drax-Beroldstein."

So the meaning was at last clear with a vengeance. The fierce old eyes left no doubt as to will behind the intent. In Ludovic the impetuosity of youth was tempered by a certain natural shrewdness and inculcated tact. He had been brought up to govern, and an important part of his teaching had been, as it should be of all rulers, to know how to meet a dangerous opposition by a graceful show of yielding.

After all, the Chancellor's line of policy, now so bluntly

indicated, was only what might have been expected of him. He had never pretended that the projected match was more than a matter of state expediency: as for love in it, he had clearly shown that such a point never troubled him. The wolf and the serpent, he had said. Yes; there was no use, especially in Ludovic's present helpless position, in opposing force, which he had not, or even spirit, which he had, to cunning. So he bowed before the expression of the old statesman's plain-spoken intent.

"I can well understand that, Baron," he replied, masking the resentment in his heart. "Were I so simple as to expect you to forego your policy for a mere matter of romance I should confess to a poor knowledge of the world and an incompetence to govern my little share of it. But if you think for a moment that I have given up my crown, you make a strange mistake. You cannot think that. Could I be capable of so weak an act of renunciation, were I so ready to bow before circumstances, I should indeed be unworthy of so noble, so high-spirited a girl as Princess Ruperta. No, I mean to assert my rights without delay, and have little fear, that, when once I have raised my standard in Beroldstein, my cousin Ferdinand will be able to stand against me."

Rollmar's face was not an easy one to read, but if at that moment it gave any clue to his thoughts, it indicated that he was of a different opinion. But he did not say so. His purpose was to marry the Princess to the King of Drax-Beroldstein, when once it was quite settled which of the cousins wore the crown firmly on his head. That issue they might fight out between themselves, and welcome. As to the result he was cynically indifferent.

"Very well, sire," he said calmly, "your spirit is admirable and deserves success. As a sensible man you will hardly blame my master if he, before giving his daughter's hand, waits for the interesting result. Now, it is time I was on my way."

With a reverence, he motioned his guest towards the door.

"You will at least let me bear you company, Baron?" Ludovic asked. "Our ways lie together, and I shall not rest until I know the Princess is safe."

"I shall be honoured," Rollmar answered. "If your Majesty will take some refreshment, while I speak a parting word with the Duke."

Rollmar was all suavity when he rejoined Ludovic; and, at the head of some four-score men, they set out at a smart pace for Teufelswald.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE COUNT AND RUPERTA

AMAN of Count Irromar's abnormal cunning and insight had little difficulty in guessing something very near the truth about his captives. They were ladies of rank, Ludovic had told him, and he could quite believe it. Indeed the information jumped with a shrewd suspicion already in his head, which, however, naturally stopped far short of the real truth. Tracing in his mind the probabilities of the affair, he constructed an elopement, a pursuing party, a sudden uniting of opposite interests, resulting in the parley he had held from the window. It all fitted in with absolute exactness; the circumstantial plausibility was so great that he decided he could accept and act upon supposition as certainty. With this intent he next evening presented himself once more before Ruperta. A certain urgent business which claimed him had prevented an earlier interview.

"It is as well that I have kept you safe under my roof, gracious Fräulein," he began, with almost apologetic deference. "You have thereby escaped, if not danger, at least a disagreeable encounter."

Ruperta's mood had grown, during these long hours, to one of proud resentment. Fear, for herself at least, she did not know. The great effect the situation had upon her was to fill her with an almost maddening, because futile, indignation. In her treatment at the Count's hands she saw nothing but a shameful outrage; the actual dan-

ger in which she stood scarcely occurred to her. Her fearlessness left her self-reliant, and a self-reliant woman is to herself indeed a tower of strength. As for her captor and host, she told herself that she saw through his deceit, and as for his brute strength, why—she was a woman. It was scarcely conceivable, at any rate in her experience, that this man could resort to any brutality in order to coerce her.

She replied to him, with disdainful resentment, "What may that be, Count?"

Her tone suggested that she was prepared to disbelieve whatever he might be going to tell her; but he ignored his unpromising reception.

"Now the strange desertion of Lieutenant von Bertheim and Captain von Ompertz may be accounted for."

"Yes?" Her eyes were fixed on him as though to detect and shrivel up the coming falsehood. But Karl Irromar was no ordinary man, no ordinary wrong-doer, even, and the effect was otherwise.

"Captain Rollmar—have I the name aright?—Captain Rollmar has been here."

At the name her face had brightened expectantly for an instant, then clouded again. She would give him no lead; he must tell his story without suggestion from her, and she could judge of its truth or falsehood.

"Indeed?" Only intense repression of her anxiety could have enabled her to pronounce the word so coldly.

"Yes. He came with no friendly intent, that was certain, and I judged it advisable to keep you under my protection and to refuse him entrance to my house."

"The Lieutenant and Captain Ompertz?" She could not resist the question which forced itself to her lips.

"They had evidently fallen in with Captain Rollmar and his party," he replied darkly. "The result of their meeting, you, gracious lady, may best imagine."

In truth she did not know what to imagine, what to believe. A chill of despairing loneliness seemed to sweep

over her soul. Only for a moment, and then she called up her courage again.

"I am thankful," he said, insistently, "that I deemed it wise to keep you here under my protection."

His assumption of patronage seemed to provoke her. "Indeed, Count," she returned, "your intention may have been kind, but it is not so certain that I stood in need of protection—from more than that night's storm."

"I think," he replied, insinuatingly, "that you would not have cared to meet this Captain Rollmar."

"You might," she rejoined, with spirit, "have given me the chance, instead of keeping me ignorant of his presence."

The Count laughed. "The captain has not gone far yet. Shall I send for him?"

The steely blue eyes were on her, lighted with masterful amusement. How she loathed the indignity she could not resent.

"If you are serious you may send for him," she answered quietly.

For a moment he stood looking at her in silence, in a pause of calculation.

"I shall not send for this Captain Rollmar," he said at length, speaking with marked deliberation, "for two reasons."

For an instant her eyes were raised to his face; that was all the invitation he received to state them.

"One," he proceeded, "is that I would not for the world subject you to the chance or shadow of annoyance. And I have every reason to believe that would be the outcome of my delivering you up to this rough fellow who is pursuing you, and who may have already wreaked his vengeance on your—your escort."

She made a slight movement, perhaps the checking of a shiver: that was the only break in her impassivity.

"The other," his tone had fallen to an unlooked-for softness now, and his manner was almost a caress: "the

other is—forgive me, gracious lady—that I could not bear to give you up to another man's keeping." The speech brought no sign of acknowledgment from her. He drew a step closer. "You may understand, Fräulein, and pardon?" he added earnestly.

Now she looked him full in the face, and there seemed nothing in her eyes but scorn. "I can at least understand," she replied.

"And not forgive?"

"Forgive!" she echoed, with imperious yet half amused disdain, "that is scarcely a word to be used between us, Count. You pay but a bad compliment to your hospitality if, after so short an acquaintance, you find that necessary."

"I trust it may not be," he rejoined. "But, surely, where you are concerned, Fräulein, the matter of mere time can hardly influence the warmth of the feelings, and therefore of the expressions, of those who have the privilege of your society."

His meaning, though plain enough, was guardedly couched, more so than could manifestly have been usual in one whose manner was wont to be bluff and direct; but, in truth the outward coldness of her personality repulsed him, in spite of the mad desire to break through that icy rampart.

"I am your guest, Count," she returned, with a quiet, confident dignity. "As such I may claim at least respect from you."

The impatience of one who had known little thwarting got the better of his tact. "My one desire in the world," he declared, with a touch of passion, "is that you shall be much more to me than my guest."

She drew back proudly from his importunity. "And my desire is," she retorted, "to cease to be the guest of one who abuses the position of a host."

They were at issue now; the fencing must become a fight in earnest.

"If you were aware of my power," Irromar said, "you would know that I do not abuse, or even use it, except to lay it at your feet."

The eyes were fixed on her, holding her there like moral fangs. To her they seemed more fierce, more fearful even than Rollmar's, not so much in the will they showed, as in the possibilities of evil they suggested. But, strange as this salient malevolence was to her, her innate courage met the crisis, and she told herself her spirit should not be conquered.

"It does not appear so," she replied. "Your word and actions do not agree. Else why am I kept here a prisoner?"

He made a gesture of protest. "You are mistaken," he assured her plausibly. "I have but taken upon myself to keep you here out of the way of the danger which I see, though you may not, is threatening you. That this necessity brings a joy to me is a fact which I dare to hope may not be indifferent to you."

"Under the circumstances," she replied steadily, "it can scarcely be of great moment to me."

"It may be," he flamed out, "it may be—of the greatest moment."

It was a covert threat, but she ignored it. "May I ask," she said, with a calmness in contrast to his outburst, "as I appear to be in your power"—the words were hateful to her, but not to be shirked—"what your purpose is with regard to my detention here?"

"I had hoped," he answered, with a soreness which he could not altogether disguise, "that the question, or at least its tone, might have been unnecessary." Then his passion began to rise. "Let me tell you, madam, without further cloaked speeches, that you seek to repulse, to defy—for my reception at your hands points to nothing else—a man whose will is law to himself and to those who cross his path. No one yet, from the late King Josef downwards, has ever successfully defied or resisted my will.

That its harsh expression is seldom heard, or even felt, arises from the fact that I am a man of good heart and gentle birth. That, though I live a strenuous life, I hate brutality and love refinement. Will you not take the trouble to look beneath the surface and see—chut! I loathe vanity, but you wilfully shut your eyes to every object but an unworthy one, and compel me to show you myself, a man unlike, certainly, any other man you ever met, you ever could know, a man of a power second to no other one man's in Europe, a man who is noble in deed, he claims, as in name, and, above all a man who asks nothing better, could better be, than to lay his power, his heart, his very life at your feet, asking you to return, even in a small measure, the devoted all-conquering love with which you have inspired him."

With every phrase the passion of his pleading had risen, till it touched the very height of insistent fervour. As the climax was reached he put out his arms, but she avoided him with a quick, decisive movement. "No, no!" she exclaimed, in mingled dislike and indignation.

"Be sensible," he entreated. "Why will you not hear me?"

If the brute in his nature was, from an ominous light in his eyes, on the point of asserting itself, the temper in Ruperta's was now fairly roused.

"Hear you!" she echoed, her indignation flashing out, "I have heard—from you—of your nobility of character, and you now seem bent upon giving me an illustration of it."

"If you make me beside myself with love and your coldness," he urged.

"Love?" she repeated scornfully. Then, regarding her persecutor with abhorrent eyes, his power of will and action, his unscrupulousness and cunning of purpose and, consequently, her own helplessness came home to her. But this acute realization of her desperate position brought with it in a flash the idea of an expedient. To

oppose her courage to this man's strength was hopeless, but, in her extremity, she remembered her trick of temporizing with Udo Rollmar. Wit might succeed where mere spirit failed. True, her former experiment had not been altogether successful, it had led to a passage which was unpleasant enough, but it had at least shown her, what she had sometimes heard, that man is most gullible when his heart or his passion is touched. This man's mind was, as it were, a very citadel of cunning behind the outer fortification of his brute strength; but Udo Rollmar was astute, too, in an objectionable degree, and she had, at any rate for the moment, fooled him. The idea of stooping to duplicity was to a girl of Ruperta's proud spirit utterly repugnant; but if ever subterfuge was justifiable it was so in her case, in this crisis as she stood there helpless, desperate, at the mercy of a man who clearly knew none where his own selfish will was concerned.

"You talk of love," she said, with a little softening of the scorn in her eyes. "What can you expect me to understand by that?"

"Nothing," he answered readily, and perhaps, for the moment, sincerely, "but what is due to your position, to your honour and mine."

She laughed with a touch of satire that was yet provocatively fascinating. "One might easily doubt your honourable intentions, Count Irromar, from the manner of your wooing."

Perhaps the success, which was more familiar to him than failure, gave him the cue that he was gaining ground, and shut his eyes to the idea that this royally masterful girl could yoke her pride with deceit.

"I would I might dare hope," he said, caressingly confident, "that in your eyes impetuosity may be my greatest fault."

"Impetuosity," she said, "means lack of consideration, of respect."

"No, upon my soul," he protested. "Will you not do me justice and think of my temptation; how short the time given me to speak my heart may be? It is that which has driven me to the impetuosity which has offended you."

"You bring me," she rejoined, with what seemed a lingering touch of resentment, "news of my friends' fate, and, with the same breath, make love to me. Is that delicate consideration, Count? Where is your noble breeding?"

"I have erred," he replied, with an affectation of humility. "It was my heart that got the better of my head. All I have to pray for now is that you will let me earn your forgiveness."

She kept her eyes averted and made no reply, and he judged it best to leave the delicate question for the moment where it was.

"Tell me," he continued, with a change of tone, "if the question be not offensive, this Lieutenant von Bertheim? He was your lover?"

She made a slight inclination of assent.

"Ah! I think I can read the story. Yes; romance is a fine illusion, but power is finer, and it is real. My dearest hope is that you will soon share mine."

Still she was silent, for silence was safest then. He, inwardly exultant, accepted such favourable sign as that silence gave, and, where importunity was manifestly distasteful, forebore to follow up so quick upon his advantage.

"And this Captain Rollmar?" he asked, with a knowing curiosity, "He was the Lieutenant's rival, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"And not a desirable one, that is manifest."

"Hardly, perhaps."

"The son of a powerful man."

"The Chancellor Rollmar; yes."

"The story is plain. You may correct me if I have it

wrongly. The Rollmar needs but to ask and have. To avoid the indignity of such a disposal, to say nothing of a, perhaps natural, preference, you take to flight with a lover of your own choosing. Your friend goes with you, to play propriety, no doubt."

Ruperta loathed the half-veiled insolence of his examination, but, at least, it was gaining time and keeping him from a more dangerous subject.

"It was only natural," she said, "that I should have a friend of my own sex with me."

"Quite natural," he smiled. "And the big captain? Ah, of course, he played coachman. The Lieutenant might have chosen a lighter Jehu from among his trusty friends. Or perhaps there was a tenderness between him and Fräulein Minna? It is scarcely surprising that your carriage broke down. Still, it is not for me, of all men, to complain of that. Nor shall it be my fault if you regret it long."

Every moment her hatred of the man and his scoffing manner increased; but, at least so far, it was harmless.

"And your intention," he went on, "was to go to Beroldstein? And there get married? Out of Rollmar's jurisdiction? Am I right?"

"It it gives you any satisfaction to know it, you are not far wrong."

"Ah!" He was pleased at the successful display of his many-sided power. "But there is one thing I do not know, except negatively, and cannot guess."

"Indeed?" There was perhaps more sarcasm in the word than he liked.

"Your real name and rank. I only know that you are not what you have given yourself out to be."

"And what is your idea, Count?"

"That your rank is higher than it appears."

"And to that is to be ascribed the unusual respect with which you have thought proper to treat me?"

His face darkened at the irony of the rebuke which, dangerous as it was, she could not restrain.

"To me," he returned, as the cloud passed away, "you are only the most beautiful of earthly women. As a man, as your devoted lover, I am content with that; as your host and protector I am entitled to know more."

Before the embarrassing question could be farther pressed, there came a gentle knock at the door. Probably aware that the interruption would not have been ventured upon without good cause, the Count, with an impatient frown, strode across the room and opened it. Outside stood the old major-domo. "What is it, Gomer?"

"A traveller, an old gentleman, is at the door begging hospitality for the night, my lord. He has lost his way."

"So!" The Count's face was full of alert suspicion. "An old man, you say? Is he alone?"

"Quite alone, my lord."

Irromar thought for a moment, then said, "Let him come in. I will see him before I consent to let him stay. We must be careful, Gomer, just now."

"True, my lord," the old man replied. "But there is little to be feared here."

So, with a word of excuse to the Princess, Irromar went down into the hall.

CHAPTER XXV

THE FOX IN THE WOLF'S DEN

IN his first glance at the stranger, the Count told himself that Gomer was right and there was nothing to be on his guard against in the withered, decrepit-looking old man who, wrapped in a fur-lined travelling cloak, stood before him with a demeanour of apologetic entreaty. At the second glance he was not so sure. But at least there was nothing physically to be feared from the harbouring of such a guest, and as to cunning, why, he was himself no fool, and loved nothing better than to pit his wits against other men's.

The old traveller had missed his road, it appeared, and got lost in the labyrinth of small mountain valleys which abounded in the district. He had been anxious to push on, but the task was clearly hopeless for that night, and as he was told he could expect to come upon no decent inn for many miles, he was forced to make bold to crave a night's hospitality, should it in no way inconvenience the noble Count. The noble Count was for the moment in two minds about entertaining a guest whom continued scrutiny rendered less and less prepossessing. But he was a man of action and of daring: if this dubious old fellow's presence meant danger he would delight in finding it out and checking it, at the same time making his guest pay dearly for his temerity; if he were but the strayed traveller he represented himself to be, why, he might count upon a chatty supper companion. Accord-

ingly, he graciously placed himself and his establishment at the stranger's disposal and presently they went in to supper. It would be well, Irromar reflected, to give his fair prisoner a night's respite, and to renew their interview next morning. Once he could bring her into subjection to his dominant will—and of this he was confident—he would have no fear of attack or of any unpleasant consequences.

He found he had not been mistaken in his forecast of his guest's sociable qualities. Indeed during the meal each of its partakers considerably astonished the other, not merely by the acute knowledge of the world which he displayed but more particularly by his intimate acquaintance with affairs, both political and social, such as was for the most part denied to outsiders.

"Who," the Count's busy brain puzzled, "can this man be, who has such a confident knowledge of the inner circle of politics? Hardly the enterprising merchant he would have me believe. It is just possible; since your eminent trader makes it his business to be *au courant* with every move in the political world that vigilance or money can give him wind of. And yet——? The Count doubted and guessed, turned the conversation into probing channels, only to grow all the more interested and doubtful. By degrees the conviction increased that this pretended wealthy merchant was an emissary whose real errand was concerned with the recovery of his prisoners. He calculated in his mind the time it would have taken for their friends to have received information of their whereabouts and for his guest to have arrived on the scene. It fitted exactly. He then concluded that the old man sitting by the fire and chatting with such confident ease was there for a purpose.

What? That would surely appear if he had the patience to wait for it. Was this an emissary of Rollmar's? The Captain, the Chancellor's son, had said his captives were ladies of rank. Had Rollmar sent——?

Was this Rollmar himself, this old, sharp-eyed man who carried with him such an atmosphere of innate power? Was it possible?"

For a moment the truth flashed across his mind, only to be dismissed as preposterous. Nevertheless it was an indication of the Count's acuteness of perception. And his reckoning up of his guest showed that he was, as he was wont to declare himself, no fool.

Rollmar?

The suspicion recurred persistently, and its grounds increased in colour and plausibility. He was awaiting developments now in a mood of intense and provocative curiosity. If this man had come with a purpose, surely he must declare it without much more delay. Except he came to spy and then—— The suave face which masked the busy brain darkened for an instant at the idea. As yet his thoughts had not reached the point of considering what action he would take should this in truth turn out to be the wily Chancellor. It would be time enough to determine that when this strange situation—too strange for belief—presented itself. Meanwhile, he watched his guest like a tiger, smooth and treacherous, with a readiness to spring hidden under an attitude of sleek repose.

But he had not to wait long.

"You have entertained me, a chance guest, possibly a not too welcome intruder, in princely fashion, Count!" the old man said, abruptly breaking off their subject of conversation, which happened to be Prince Ferdinand's *coup-d'etat*. "In return for your unlooked-for hospitality I feel I must make an unworthy return in a confession and a piece of information which may possibly astonish you."

He spoke quietly, with an easy unconcern, as though confident of his resources and of the welcome of his communication. But his preamble was enough to confirm the Count's suspicion. No man but one, he told himself,

would have the nerve to be so genuinely at his ease when in the power of another of his character and reputation. Vanity was a strong ingredient in his imperious character; many a strong, masterful man is a baby where his vanity is touched. This one was a ruffian, yet childishly eager to proclaim himself a paragon of sagacity and intellect. The temptation to a brilliant and discomfiting move was too great to be resisted.

"You are going to tell me," he said quietly, "first that you have introduced yourself under an incognito, and secondly that your real name is——" He paused for an instant as the old man shot at him a sharp glance of curiosity. "Baron von Rollmar, Chancellor of the State of Waldavia."

If he had expected his guest to be dumfounded at such startling evidence of an abnormal faculty of perception, he did not make full allowance for the old diplomatist's power of self-restraint. Rollmar had not practised the art of thinking one thing and looking another through the course of a long public life to be taken aback even by this unexpected stroke. Without betraying the slightest sign of surprise or confusion, Rollmar made a slight bow of acknowledgement. For all the emotion he showed, his host might have merely set him right on a question of the day of the week.

"A good guess; you are quite right, Count," he returned coolly, with a slight appreciative smile. "I need hardly apologise for my false pretence, since it appears not to have reached the point of deception. As to its motive, why, I must confess I was a little doubtful of my reception here, and it was necessary that I should have the opportunity of making a certain communication to you privately."

He spoke with a calm assurance which discounted uncomfortably the Count's triumph. Indeed that seemed to have gone for nothing.

"I shall be glad, Baron," he replied, with a courtesy

which covered, not altogether successfully, his feeling of annoyance, "to learn to what important circumstance I owe the honour of entertaining so distinguished a guest."

"I should have imagined, Count," Rollmar returned, with quiet sarcasm, "that your undoubted powers of perception would have saved me also the statement of this second point. However, I can perhaps understand your reticence. It is indeed an important matter that has brought me so far afield. More momentous, perhaps, than even you surmise."

Again came the sarcastic curl of the mobile lips, provoking a temptation on the Count's part to take by the throat and strangle the contemptuous old man who dared to beard him in his stronghold.

"I can only imagine," he replied bluffly, "that your presence in my poor house may be the outcome of another and somewhat extraordinary visit to me paid yesterday by a Captain Rollmar, presumably a relative of yours."

The Chancellor nodded. "My son. The cause of my visit goes beyond that, as you know well, Count. It is occasioned by the reception you were pleased to give to Captain von Rollmar's request."

The Count gave an ugly laugh. "A strange and unaccountable demand——"

He stopped, as Rollmar held up a protesting hand. "The night grows late, Count, and I am too old a man to exchange my rest for unprofitable discussions. Of your courtesy allow me to state plainly my errand."

He was cool as ever; nevertheless, behind the calm suavity of his manner there was a touch of sternness, a suggestion of a latent power, held back in readiness to be called into action if necessary.

"You have," he proceeded, "you are ready to deny and absolutely ignore it—but you have under your roof, detained here against their will, two ladies. Yes, I said you would repudiate the fact"—for the Count had made a quick, angry sign of denial—"but that is futile. That

these ladies are for the moment in your power, I am well assured. At any rate, you will kindly allow me to argue on that supposition."

"I will not, Baron," Irromar exclaimed threateningly. "No man shall charge me with such an outrage."

"You will do well to hear me out," Rollmar continued imperturbably. "By refusing to hear a reasonable argument you may force me to resort to one more forcible and less pleasant."

The Count laughed loud and scornfully. "You have come here to threaten me? I have known the Chancellor von Rollmar's reputation well, and always gave him credit for sanity."

"That is, at least, something," the old man returned dryly, "I trust that when we part, your flattering opinion will have been in no way modified. Justified or not, you might have been sure that the Chancellor von Rollmar was at least sane enough to recognize the futility of an empty threat. Sane enough also to have stayed at home, rather than ride so many leagues to carry a mere threat—which any bullying sergeant could have done as well—to a man who seems for many years to have thriven on such empty food. No, Count; it was not to take up the challenge of your refusal to deliver up these ladies that I am here, but rather to set right, amicably, I hope, a certain misapprehension which, doubtless, induced you to refuse Captain Rollmar's request."

The Count, with a set and not encouraging smile on his face, kept silent, in an affectation of courteous tolerance. He foresaw that the point for which Rollmar was making must be the identity of his captives, and he was anxious to learn it.

"When I tell you," the Chancellor proceeded, "who the ladies are, whom for the moment we may presume you are detaining, you will, I am sure, recognize that your action, unless quickly abandoned, is bound to have very serious consequences."

"Anotner threat, Excellency?" Irromar could not help interjecting.

"You shall judge how far," was Rollmar's quiet answer. "This act of kidnapping is one that must carry with it its natural, its logical punishment. Threats are here superfluous. But the ladies in question are of high rank. One is Countess Minna von Croy, principal Maid of Honour to Princess Ruperta of Waldavia, and the other is Princess Ruperta herself."

The hit, so quietly delivered, told the more heavily from its total unexpectedness. In the game of surprises the Count could not but own himself worsted. But, with the perfect nerve system of a healthy tiger, he did not take long to recover himself.

"Then it would appear that my house has indeed been honoured," he laughed, as nettled by his discomfiture. "I do not doubt your veracity, Baron," he continued, less roughly as he regained greater command of himself, "since your very presence here goes far to prove it."

As he spoke, he was rapidly reviewing his position, as seen in this new light. Could he, even yet, hold this prize? It was not in his nature to give up anything on which his heart was set. Still the keen old man confronting him was not one to be brow-beaten. All the same, why should he not try? At the worst he could but capitulate if he found his position untenable.

"It is a very pretty story," he continued, with another disagreeable laugh of incredulity. "Your statement that your Princess is roaming about the country is one which I am ready to accept from your lips. But when you take upon yourself to declare that she is detained under my roof, I must beg to join issue and repudiate the assertion, even coming, as it does, from so illustrious a source."

"You deny it, Count?" Rollmar would cut short this unprofitable fencing. He was not a man to be played with, although the vivid recollection of Ruperta's superb beauty made Irromar neglectful of the fact.

"I must, Excellency, you are wasting your time——"

"I think I am," he retorted dryly. "Therefore let me conclude my errand. As I have already suggested, I should wish to conduct this business between us in an amicable manner. That being so, I will, if you will permit me, put before you my view, an old statesman's view, of the position in which you stand."

"By all means, Excellency," the Count assented readily. The possible consequences of his act, and its chance of success were just what he was curious to learn.

The Chancellor put the tips of his long white fingers together, and spoke as coolly as though, instead of facing in his den, perhaps the most dangerous and unscrupulous breaker of laws, divine and human, in Europe, he were discussing a clause of a new bill with a secretary in his own bureau. But it is in critical situations that the real staying power of a man's character shows itself.

"Shortly, then," he began. "You say that these ladies are not detained here by you. That may or, pardon me, may not be the truth. I shall not concern myself to argue it. But," he proceeded, as the suggestion of sternness in his equable tone grew somewhat in its restrained intensity, "we, that is the State which I have the honour to represent, have the warrant of sufficient evidence to convince us that it is a denial which we cannot accept. Your own antecedents, Count, you must allow," here the old intriguer smiled deprecatingly, "are scarcely such as make for implicit confidence in your bare word."

Irromar smiled in his turn, but the smile did not reach his eyes, which were darkly threatening. "You are a bold man, Baron, to tell me that, here in my own house. You presume upon your years."

"Scarcely," Rollmar replied with a shrug. "Except so far as my age gives me little life to lose. Any boldness I may show comes from nature and from the knowledge that I have a mighty protector a stone's throw away."

If the Count wondered what that was, his guest did not at that moment enlighten him.

"Now," Rollmar continued, with a significant glance at the clock, "should our friend, Count Irromar, persist, as I do not think he will, in his repudiation, it will become our unpleasant duty to pursue our enquiries by force."

"Force!" Irromar laughed.

"Force," the Chancellor repeated. "Our Count is a strong man," he went on pleasantly, "strong in will and in sinew, he has a strong house, fortified, doubtless, by art, as it is by nature; he has a garrison at his command; but my knowledge of men tells me that he is not foolish enough to put his security to an unwisely severe test, or to imagine that it enables him to defy the resources of a State, should that State make up its mind in earnest to pull down his house about his ears."

Irromar was on his mettle now. "That would depend," he commented grimly. "He might begin the tussle with a winning advantage. The holding, for instance, as hostages of perhaps the two most important persons in that State."

Rollmar gave a little triumphant smile. "I note your admission, Count, that the other is here."

Irromar had realized the slip when it had passed his lips. He could only give a shrug of indifference. After all, a bland repudiation would hardly serve him against this self-controlled, penetrating old strategist.

"But," the Chancellor went on, "to resume our argument. His holding these important persons would simply make it imperative that strong action should be taken. But, no. You will not make a hostage of me, Count Irromar. Had such a fate any terrors for me, I should scarcely have been at pains to put myself in your power. My life is for the State, and at my master's disposal; I hold it worthless, when balanced against the welfare of him and his."

There was a dignified touch of self-abnegating patriot-

ism in the old minister's speech which carried conviction to its hearer, for all that he affected to smile at the declaration.

"You see, Count," he went on, "I have, as is my custom, well weighed the consequences of my act; I doubt whether you have done the same respecting your own."

"I am not in the habit," Irromar replied, with an outburst of scornful, over-bearing pride, "of troubling myself about the consequences of any act of mine which may commend itself to my fancy. I have hitherto found myself able to shape such consequences myself."

"Ah, that is where you are wrong, or at least short-sighted," Rollmar returned, with provoking, almost patronising, coolness. "That system may succeed for a while, but it surely means disaster in the end. You are within measurable distance—literally measurable distance—of that now."

"Indeed?"

"In very truth," Rollmar maintained steadfastly. "I am an old man, weak and alone, completely at your mercy." As he spoke, he rose and faced Irromar with the dignified power which only years passed in ruling men can give. "I think I have earned the reputation of knowing every move, every possibility of the game called statecraft, and I know the difference between a *brutum fulmen*, an empty threat, and the absolutely certain result of a well-planned and organized action. Before I left home, I set in motion the machinery for the alternative accomplishment of the purpose which brought me here. My reason for coming to you thus quietly and alone was to avoid making the episode public, to obviate an unhappy scandal."

He drew himself up and fastened his fierce, undimmed eyes on the Count, who stood fumingly playing his waiting game with lessening prospect of success.

"One word more, Count, and only one, since I tire of stretching my patience to the length of your equivocation.

Standing here before you, and recognizing your personal power over me, I tell you, even though they may be the last words my tongue may ever utter, that unless Princess Ruperta is produced and set free within the hour, this castle of yours shall, by this time tomorrow be a ruin, and yourself hanged before its walls."

For a moment it seemed as though the contingency Rollmar had suggested might become an accomplished fact, and that provocative old man have the breath strangled out of him by those muscular hands. But from such a fate perhaps his host's complex character saved him. After a few moments of ugly hesitation, the Count started away and took a turn across the room. Bold, unprincipled dare-devil that he was, he had yet a strong idea of the importance of his own welfare. In the midst of his discomfiture and consequent anger, he felt that he had to deal with no ordinary man, or even statesman. The threat which stirred up his rage might be a trick, but the chances were heavily against it. Chancellor Rollmar was, he knew, a man of action as well as of intrigue. The position was humiliating, and he cursed the chance that had brought upon him this fall for his pride, this humbling in his hitherto unbroken success in defying all who crossed his will. But the prize, although for the moment within his reach, was not for his grasping; he realized that, and that nothing now was left to him but to cover his yielding and minimise his defeat in the best manner his wit could suggest. And his shrewdness told him that it would be sheer waste of time and trouble were he to attempt to deceive his keen old adversary in the manner of accepting his defeat. To retire fighting would hardly serve to satisfy his own self-complacency. He had better make a clean surrender. So, when he turned again to his guest it was with a face almost laughingly genial.

"I scarcely think the impregnability of my house will be put to a test over this business, Excellency," he said with, to all appearance, unruffled frankness. "But to one

of your eminent shrewdness and perspicacity I need hardly explain the motives of my action and my caution in admitting it."

As Rollmar's sign of agreement suggested that he had put a rather different construction on the words from that which was intended, the Count was fain to explain them.

"I have done myself the honour to retain the Princess under my roof from motives of protection."

"Ah!" Rollmar evidently accepted the statement for what it was worth.

"You will allow," Irromar continued, with dogged complacency, "that the circumstances under which her Highness came under my roof were, to say the least, extraordinary, and might be held to excuse any ignorance or error on my part."

"Assuredly, Count," Rollmar agreed. "The circumstances were no doubt, peculiar."

"They suggested caution, if not interference, on my part," his host proceeded, "even before I was aware of the identity of my guests."

"Certainly."

The dominant feeling which now possessed the Count's mind was intense curiosity. "The strange conduct and personality of the ladies' companions were calculated to fill one with suspicion."

He paused after his tentative speech, but Rollmar merely bowed his agreement.

"The circumstances and manner of the party's arrival here were mysterious.

Again he paused enquiringly, only to receive the same provoking, silent response.

"May I ask," the Count said blandly, "since a mutual understanding has been established, and before I have the satisfaction of restoring the Princess to your guardianship, may I ask who the two men were who formed her escort?"

All this time, Rollmar had been turning over in his mind a certain idea which was closely connected with the subject of the other's curiosity. And it resulted in his answering—

"Another surprise for you, Count, I fancy. Of Captain von Ompertz you know as much as I; the other was a man of some interest just now, namely, Prince Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein."

"Prince Ludwig? The man who should be King of Drax-Beroldstein?"

The Count was indeed surprised, and showed it the more unrestrainedly that there was no reason for its concealment.

"The same. Now the mystery is explained."

"Indeed it is," Irromar replied thoughtfully. "Had I only known it sooner, what trouble and cross-purposes would have been avoided. What lives spared. Prince Ludwig of Drax-Beroldstein."

The Chancellor stood watching him in silence, an amused smile playing at his lips.

Presently the Count spoke again, as he got a better grasp of the situation. "The Princess runs away, then, with her intended husband; the one you have provided for her. Ah, doubtless to face the usurper, Prince Ferdinand."

Rollmar's smile deepened with a grim intent. "Ah, that is where the romance appears, romance not provided for in my scheme. I scarcely blame you, Count, that you have not yet threaded the maze. It has a deeper winding yet. What if the Princess should be ignorant of the fact that her lover is Prince Ludwig?"

"You are surely pleased to joke, Baron?"

"So far as my knowledge goes," Rollmar maintained, "she does not know that he is more than Lieutenant von Bertheim."

"Or perhaps she would not have fallen in love with him?"

"A shrewd deduction, Count. When one wishes a woman to go forward it is not a bad plan to draw her back. Now, you see the pretty affair into which chance has thrust you."

Irromar laughed. "My house has indeed been honoured in receiving three such illustrious guests. The Princess of Waldavia, the renowned Chancellor von Rollmar and—I hardly know how to describe my third guest—a sovereign prince and yet no sovereign."

His glance at Rollmar was suggestive of a question. The old man drew back the corners of his mouth in a significant smile.

"No sovereign, certainly, at present," he responded.

The other was not slow at perceiving the hint.

"Have I, then, done you, after all, a service, Baron? Does that alter your plans? Or is my question indiscreet?"

Rollmar gave him a curiously indefinable look.

"My plan is an alliance between our Princess and the reigning King of Drax-Beroldstein," he said quietly.

CHAPTER XXVI

IRROMAR'S TRICK

AS Count Irromar went to fetch the Princess, he was concocting a scheme, daring as became his nature, but one which at a stroke should add immensely to his power and change his position from that of an outlaw, an almost brigand noble, to that of a recognized member of the aristocracy of the land. He would make a bold bid for the royal favour and countenance; once they were his, he could trust to his wealth, to his energy, his acquirements, and above all, his will, to give him social position and rehabilitation. It was a flattering plan, and the chance of the moment seemed to have brought to his hand the instrument by which this seemingly impossible metamorphosis could be effected. He had learnt from Rollmar, in no wise loath to tell him, that King Ludwig was waiting not far from his castle presumably to know the result of the Chancellor's negotiation. That being so, and with a shrewd idea of the old intriguer's acquiescence, the rest was, to a man of his resources, easy.

When he came into the room—having sent Ruperta urgent word that he must see her, even at that late hour—she wondered what new trick or persecution this was to be, but her apprehension was manifest only in her quick glance of enquiry at his face. Otherwise she looked as imperiously calm as ever.

"I have news for you," he began, "two pieces of

news, one good and the other doubtful, since I know not how you may receive it."

"What are they, Count?" she asked, on the alert for a new mark of duplicity.

"You shall hear the least pleasant first," he replied, with a courteous deference which contrasted with the half-veiled insolence of his late manner. "Baron von Rollmar is here."

The announcement was indeed startling, and made her look up quickly with a flush of surprise.

"Baron von Rollmar here? The Chancellor?"

"None other than your father's minister. You see, Princess, he has told me who you are, and so shamed my blindness and temerity. Dare I ask for pardon?"

She gave an inclination of her head, a limited acceptance of his apology. "What has Baron von Rollmar come for?" she asked.

"For you, Princess."

Her look justified his calling the news of doubtful acceptability. And, as it jumped with his project, he noticed it with satisfaction.

"He is here to conduct you back to Waldenthor."

It was true enough, yet the full, plain truth was scarcely apparent to her. Having no knowledge, save by vague guessing, of what had taken place outside the castle during her captivity, she could not be expected to comprehend the real urgency which had brought the old minister so far.

"To take me back to Waldenthor?" she repeated.

Irromar gave a confirmatory nod. "At least, he takes you with him and his party. I am here to have the honour of conducting you to his Excellency."

Ruperta thought of the fortress of Krell, and showed no alacrity at the prospect of the meeting.

"You had another piece of news," she said, suddenly remembering it.

"Good news. Lieutenant von Bertheim is here, unhurt and——"

"With the Baron?" she asked incredulously.

He smiled. "No. I may be bold to claim penetration enough to agree with your Highness as to the improbability of that. No. The Lieutenant is not, indeed, within the castle, but he is not far away."

He watched the ray of joy on the girl's face, and as he watched and welcomed he hated it.

"I have come,"—he proceeded—"the reason of my disturbing you, Princess, by bringing the news in person, was that I might venture to submit a proposal which might earn your pardon."

Her look invited him to speak further, and as he drank it in, he inwardly cursed the contrary fate which gave to another man this coveted interest for which he would have bartered his soul—subject, indeed, to the Master whom he so zealously served having already a lien upon it.

"I understand the situation," he said with a subtle smile. "And that the Chancellor's plans are not exactly in accord with your own. He is inclined to interpose himself between you and your happiness, to think less of romance, of hearts, than of state policy. It is not for me to interfere, nor would I do so, since Lieutenant von Bertheim has treated me in a manner which is at least strange, were it not that I owe your Highness some reparation for the presumption into which my ignorance led me. I wish to atone by giving you an opportunity of meeting the Lieutenant before your departure with the Baron Rollmar."

Her desire broke down the pride which prompted her not to be beholden to this man for an interview with her lover. She loathed the idea of taking him into her counsels, even for the moment. Still she felt that, once more in Rollmar's power, the separation would be indefinite, might be life-long, for, surely, he would not be

hoodwinked again. So she yielded to the temptation, not without hesitating at a suspicion of treachery. Still, something had to be risked, and she conceived a vague idea that her lover and she might again escape together. The Count seemed genuinely repentant; what could be his motive, but that which appeared on the surface? He would scarcely attempt a deed of violence while that grim old man was beneath his roof, and the idea of the two being partners in a plot did not seem probable. Rollmar was too shrewd to take a stranger, practically a foreigner, into his confidence and employ him in his schemes. At all events, she must take some risk; she was in a vortex of uncertainty, shaken by these untoward and startling adventures. So, with perhaps a lurking doubt in her heart, she accepted the Count's suggestion.

He read her uncertainty. "You do not give me credit for an honest desire to serve you, Princess," he observed. "It is, perhaps, after all, my own fault. But the event shall quickly prove my good faith. Give me but three words calling him to you, and I will engage that the Lieutenant shall be here within the hour."

He put writing materials before her. "I fear he will not come without a written word from you," he said quietly, as Ruperta hesitated.

The reasonableness of the suggestion was manifest. She took the pen and wrote a simple message. "Come, before I return with Rollmar. R."

As she wrote the Chancellor's name her hesitation vanished. She hated that pitiless old opponent of her happiness, and the idea of his taking her back in triumph was more humiliating than her pride cared to contemplate.

The Count took up the paper as her pen left it. "I will send this by a trusty fellow, and your friend shall soon be here," he said significantly. "I, Princess, am not dead to the romantic side of this life of ours, as the Chancellor seems to be."

The meeting between Ruperta and Rollmar was as brief as it was awkward. The old diplomatist was cynically polite, while Ruperta masked by her coolness and obvious dislike any expression of the mortification which was at her heart.

"I am sorry for any inconvenience it may cause you," Rollmar said, as Ruperta was about to retire, "but it is necessary that we make an early start homewards in the morning. The Duke will be terribly anxious until he is assured of your safety."

"Then would it not be well to send off a messenger at once?" was her not unnatural suggestion.

"That has already been done," he replied authoritatively; "but it is necessary for affairs of State that my return be not delayed an hour longer than is absolutely unavoidable."

Ruperta glanced sharply at the determined, inscrutable face, and told herself that this early start meant in all probability a longer journey than that suggested, doubtless one to the Fortress of Krell, and her whole spirit revolted at this man's insolent assumption of power over her liberty. Still, she knew her father's weakness and his servant's strength, and saw no way out of the situation, but one.

The hour had not sped when the Count redeemed his word, and Ludovic stood before her. Then at last she broke down under the strain which danger, anxiety, and uncertainty had put upon her; the brave nature gave way, and she fell sobbing into his arms.

"Darling, darling, I thought, though I dared not confess it, never to have seen you again." When she grew calmer she told him all that had happened. He looked grave, listening with a slight frown when she spoke of the Count.

"So, I owe this meeting to him," he said, with a dubious shake of the head. "It is not natural. I doubt not there is a design beneath it. The man is as treacherous

and pitiless as a leopard: I have had terrible proof of that. I do not trust him, even with the fear of Rollmar before him; he has gone too far ever to make his peace with me, even did his hate and lust for revenge allow him to seek it. Still, the present moment is ours, dearest. And that is infinitely more than, many times since we parted, I have dared to hope for."

He held her in his arms, kissing her as though the delight of that moment might vanish in the next, and be gone forever. Then presently he told her in a few words of all that had befallen him since their separation. And, as he held her there, her heart beating on his, all her reserve and the lingering trammels of her coldness flung away as she listened, sometimes with a shudder, the sign of a fear which he knew was for him, he could find it in his heart to bless his dangers, with the vindictiveness and treachery, since they had worked for the stress which had opened this paradise to him.

"Oh, my love, if they had killed you I would have died, too," she murmured, with her lips on his. "And I should have gone to my death contentedly in the thought that Heaven had given me, if only for one little hour, a lover so loyal, true and brave. Ludovic, my love, my poor starved heart thanks God for you."

For an instant the word was at his lips which would have told her his secret, for, surely, the opportunity was apt. Perhaps it was a feeling that, in a higher sense, in that atmosphere so fully charged with tenderness and love, the cold shock of the announcement would be unfitting; perhaps, too, his sensitive, innate chivalry made him shrink from taking advantage of that supreme moment. The very certainty that the stroke must win held him back from making it. Anyhow it passed, and when rapture allowed him speech it was of a still more urgent matter, their escape. She told him it was for that she had risked the message.

"The Baron does not say so, but I know I am destined

for Krell. And once there," she shuddered, "I may say farewell to my hopes and to my liberty, except on terms which are now forever impossible."

He understood, and signified it by a kiss.

"There is no reason, I hope," he said, "why we should not push on again for Beroldstein. The longest and worst part of the way has been travelled, and the end of our journey is now not so far off. With a couple of hours' start we could laugh at pursuit, and need not fear the high roads to-night."

"Then let us go, dearest," she urged.

He smiled at the eagerness he loved. "Everything is arranged," he replied. "Ompertz is waiting with horses, and will ride with us. I fear, though, we must leave Countess Minna behind this time. But she is now safe from this fellow."

A look of disappointment clouded Ruperta's face. "Rollmar will visit my sins on poor Minna's head."

"Her penance shall be of short duration, I promise you that," Ludovic assured her confidently. "She shall join you in a very few days. Rollmar is too sensible to take a foolish and futile revenge. Indeed, it is best; more, it is necessary. We have no horse for her."

"And Minna hates riding, if you had. Well then, we must leave her. It is easier now," she added, with a loving look of confidence.

In a very few minutes preparations for the escape and the journey were made. Ludovic extinguished the light, and, cautiously opening the door, crept out, leading the way along the narrow passage, and down the winding stairs, descending to the outer door by which his guide had admitted him to the castle. No one was to be seen; the door was unlocked; they passed out, and crossed an angular court-yard to a massive stone door set in the outer wall. This, as Ludovic's conductor had shown him, was left merely bolted on the inside; at a strong pull it swung slowly open, and they found themselves in

a passage cut through the rock and leading out into the wood.

Ludovic put his arm round Ruperta to help her along the rough path.

"Now for our faithful Ompertz and the horses," he said encouragingly. "He is near at hand. Another hour, dearest, will see us miles away from this hateful place."

They were now at the end of the cutting. It was with a delicious sense of freshness and liberty that Ruperta felt the wind through the trees blowing on her face. Her lover's strong arm was round her—in a few minutes the enemies of her happiness were to be given the slip. There was just light enough to see the path; a stronger blast of wind came through the wood, deadening the sound of another rush. More quickly than they could realize it, they were surrounded by half a dozen men who had suddenly sprung from their ambush. Before Ludovic could put his hand to a weapon, he was seized by four strong fellows, who held his arms firmly, and began to drag him back to the castle. Ruperta, with all her spirit, was powerless to render him any help. She herself had been captured by two men who, with less violence, but equally insistent force, kept her from following.

But the dashing of her hopes, the sickening sense of the Count's treachery, made her desperate and reckless. She struggled furiously with her captors, two tall, evil-looking ruffians who had, however, evidently had orders to treat her with as much respect as their object permitted. This was to take her back to the castle by another entrance; but they found it not so easy. Ruperta resisted vigorously, then, remembering that Ompertz might be near, she began calling for help. It was but a faint hope, but, to her joy, she heard an answering call which was followed by the welcome appearance of the great dashing swashbuckler, who came through the wood

with a leap and uplifted sword, a very fury to the rescue.

Evidently the men thought so, for it was with no very confident air that one of them released his hold on Ruperta, and, drawing his sword, stood before her to keep Ompertz off. A dog might as well have tried the repel the spring of an attacking lion. With a mighty sweep his sword was sent flying among the trees, and it was only by a smart backward spring that he cheated the soldier's blade of its second blow.

At the same moment Ruperta found herself free, her other captor thinking less of his charge than of his skin, which was, indeed, just then in jeopardy of damage. She quickly told her rescuer what had happened. He just checked an oath of angry disappointment.

"I told him what to expect," he said, savagely rueful. "But we both hoped I might prove a false prophet. Oh,"—he set his teeth ominously—"oh, for five minutes alone with this precious Count! He should never tell another lie while I lived, or he."

Ruperta entreated him to follow her lover and free him. He felt the urgency of the move, yet hesitated.

"I dare not leave you, Princess, and if we go together"—he gave a shrug—"I am only one to defend you against this gang of bandits. It were better to see you into safety first."

But she would not hear of abandoning Ludovic while there was a chance of rescue. She too would go back; she had no fear.

Ompertz saw the true courage in her eyes, and no longer opposed her wish. The two men had skulked away; they were scarcely worth consideration now. The soldier gave his hand to Ruperta, and, sword in the other, led her quickly along the passage to the stone door. It was closed and fast bolted; the men had clearly taken their prisoner through, and now had him safely lodged. Ompertz gave a kick at the unyielding barrier.

"No hope of opening that fellow from outside," he

remarked, with a baffled shake of the head. "And, Highness, let me tell you the sooner for your sake we get out of this ugly trap the better. We should not have a chance if these rascals took it into their heads to drop a few lumps of rock down on ours."

Although Ruperta had little fear of that awkward contingency, she recognized the futility of staying there. Her heart was full of indignation and a terrible anxiety for her lover. But hers was a nature which rage and fear simply stirred into action; she would never bow to the inevitable or confess herself beaten.

"Yes. Come back with me quickly," she said, with sudden resolution.

Ompertz glanced at her and knew that the move was not prompted by fear, at least for herself. They hurried back along the passage of rock and into the wood.

"The horses are close by," Ompertz said, in a tone of doubtful suggestion.

"That is well; we may want them," Ruperta replied, and he saw that she had in her mind a plan of action.

"The Chancellor brought men—soldiers—with him? How many?"

"About eighty."

"They are near?"

"Hard by, in the forest beyond the valley."

"That is well," she said. "I can trust myself to them. I am their Princess. It is only their leaders who are so vilely treacherous."

Ompertz looked a little dubious. "If they were all like me, Princess, you might trust them to the death."

"And you think I cannot rely upon them to protect me against the false hearts and lying tongues of the cowards who threaten us? At least I will try them."

There was a rustling in the wood, and Count Irromar stood before them."

CHAPTER XXVII

AN UNWISE MERCY

“YOU have taken an unfair advantage, Princess, of my willingness to serve you,” he said, with a dark smile.

“I am again, as I might have expected, the victim of your treachery,” Ruperta retorted, full of scornful anger.

He made a deprecating gesture. “You must blame me no more now. The business is out of my hands. The treatment of which you may complain is not mine. I am no longer a free agent.”

His meaning was as obvious as was its falsehood. Ompertz took a step forward.

“Free agent or not, Count,” he said bluffly, “I shall make bold to hold you responsible for the outrage suffered by Lieutenant von Bertheim at the hands of your men. I was just wishing for an interview with you.”

The Count was eyeing him full of stern malignity. “And having chanced upon it, what do you want to say, my fine fellow?” he asked contemptuously.

The ugly look on the soldier’s face deepened. “Only this,” he answered threateningly. “That unless you give an instant order for our friend’s release, this fine fellow will take upon himself to run you through, and that without delay.”

A streak of moonlight falling through the trees showed a smile of ineffable scorn on the Count’s strong face. It

also glinted on the barrel of a pistol which he suddenly presented full at the soldier's breast.

"Silence, you dog!" he commanded. "You need a lesson in the manners befitting a lady's presence. If you speak another word it will be your last."

Ruperta sprang between them. "Count, if you harm this man your life shall pay for it. I swear. I have power that may astonish you before long. Yes; I will have you hanged if you do not instantly release the Lieutenant."

"You are quite mistaken, Princess," he replied seriously. "The Lieutenant is not my prisoner."

"You liar," she cried, beside herself with indignation at the way he was playing with her. "You will tell me next he is not in your house, in your keeping."

"It is true enough," he replied coolly. "But I have no power to release him. Perhaps you have, Highness."

The sneer was worthy of him; he had come to hate this woman whom he might not love.

"We shall see," she returned. "You refuse?"

"I fear I must—even at the risk of the penalty which your Highness has foreshadowed."

"Very well, then," she said. "You shall see how I will keep my word. Come, Captain."

She turned to Ompertz and prepared to move away.

"Permit me to escort you back to his Excellency," Irromar said. "He charged me to look after you, and my responsibility is strict."

"Your responsibility!" she echoed scornfully. "Surely, Count, you have forfeited any claim to that. I will never enter your abominable den again."

"It is most unfortunate," he replied, with a somewhat mocking show of apology, "that I should have to bear the brunt and odium of your Chancellor's actions. Surely, Princess," he continued, as though urged merely by his innate love of setting his actions in a false light, "you must be aware that it was a risky thing to attempt

to continue your elopement under the Baron's very eye; an eye which looks not too favourably on the Lieutenant's pretensions. I should certainly have warned you against any such mad attempt, had I not thought that your good sense made it unnecessary."

Ruperta turned from him, disdainfully impatient. "I cannot discuss the matter with you, Count, especially as I have good reasons for believing no word you say."

He gave a shrug. "It is most unfortunate, I must repeat, this persistence in imagining my ill-will. As for your interest in the Lieutenant's welfare, I can only refer you to Baron Rollmar, to whom it is now my duty to conduct you."

He advanced to her with outstretched hand. She shrank from him. Ompertz whispered a word to her as he fell back a pace. These movements altered the relative positions of the three. Ruperta had scarcely caught the soldier's whisper, but she was quick-witted enough to divine his intention. She suffered Irromar to lay his hand on her arm. It gave her an excuse for struggling—to make a sudden clutch at the hand which held the pistol. Simultaneously Ompertz gave a swift spring, and, as Ruperta's hold hampered the Count from turning to meet his attack, seized him from behind and got his arm tightly round his neck.

Irromar was a very Hercules, but now he was taken at a disadvantage, and Ompertz was of strength far above the average. It was a fierce joy to him to find his muscles round that lying throat, and in a very few seconds he had the Count half-throttled on the ground. Then the pistol was wrested away, and their enemy lay at their mercy.

"Now let me put an end to the villain," Ompertz gasped, as with fingers gripping the Count's throat and knee pressing on his chest he held out his hand for the pistol.

But Ruperta refused. Perhaps the livid, distorted



“Ruperta’s hold hampered the Count from turning to meet his attack.”

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face showed her too vividly the horror of such a midnight deed, and obscured the sense of expediency.

"No," she objected. "We cannot. He must not die here—like this."

"Then you give Lieutenant von Bertheim's life for his," Ompertz urged, bitterly balked. "In Heaven's name, let me put a bullet through his lying brain, and do a good deed for once."

But she would not consent. "If he swears on his honour that he will release the Lieutenant, his life shall be spared," she said.

Ompertz groaned at the throwing away of this chance. "His honour! You will repent it if you trust to that," he said, as he tightened his grip on the Count's throat, since he might not shoot him.

But Ruperta saw his intention, and insisted that he should relax his hold. "You hear, Count?" she said.

"I swear," he gasped.

"Of course he swears," growled Ompertz.

For some moments Irromar lay panting; the soldier looking down on him with a grim hankering that was almost comic. Suddenly, from a position in which most men would have been helpless, the Count, who seemed one compact mass of muscle, contrived by a convulsive effort to throw himself on his side, and a desperate struggle began. The suddenness of the effort had taken Ompertz by surprise, and so at some disadvantage. Still, he welcomed the renewed struggle, since it gave him an excuse for shooting. But once, when he might have fired with deadly effect, he hesitated through fear of hitting Ruperta who had seized one of the Count's arms, and then, when he did fire, the bullet seemed to take no effect at all. With an exclamation of disappointment, he dropped the pistol, and set himself to grapple in deadly earnest with his formidable adversary. But great as was his strength, it was pitted now against one of the strongest sets of muscles in Europe. Little by little the

Count got the advantage, he was a skilful wrestler and knew all the tricks of that art, so that not even Ruperta's weight hanging on to his arm made the struggle evenly balanced. Before long he was able to force Ompertz backwards and, by a dexterous twist, to spring clear of him. It was only just in time, for Ruperta had taken Ompertz' sword, and was only hesitating to use it from fear of striking the wrong man as they swayed and turned in their desperate encounter.

Now the Count was free. "Quick! the sword!" Ompertz cried, as he recovered his balance and sprang to her for the weapon. There was a loud laugh of mockery, and, almost before Ompertz had turned to rush after him, the Count had disappeared in the darkness. Sword in hand, the soldier followed as best he could, only to be brought up very soon by the manifest hopelessness of the pursuit and the fear of missing the Princess. To her he returned, baffled and fuming.

"I said you would regret it, Highness," was his reproachful greeting.

She was pale and trembling slightly from the excitement. "It cannot be helped," she replied, with a touch of authority. "I am sorry for your sake, but I could not have the man, whatever his crimes, done to death like that."

"He has the devil in him," Ompertz exclaimed wrathfully. "Now between him and the Chancellor, who has the infernal touch too, I fear, you may say good-bye to the chance of getting the Lieutenant free. And I had my prayer answered and my fingers round that villain's throat. It was wicked to fling away the chance."

"Yes, I am sorry now," Ruperta agreed, showing not half the intense regret she felt. "But I am not going to submit myself tamely as a victim to these outrages and false dealings. I am going to Beroldstein."

"You, Princess? To Beroldstein?"

"Alone," she answered resolutely. "I will appeal

to the King of Drax-Beroldstein, since the Duke of Waldavia, my own father, cannot help me."

"But the King of Drax-Beroldstein," Ompertz objected, "is not Ludovic, but Ferdinand."

"So much the better," she returned. "It makes my task less disagreeable and scarcely more doubtful."

He recognized the hideous complications which made her plan so hopeless, yet he saw no sufficient reason for breaking his pledge of secrecy. After all, Ludovic's release was the great thing to try for; in the interests of that, the less known of his identity the better.

"I may go with you, Princess? The horses——"

"No," she replied. "I should like your escort, but cannot take you hence. It will be something for me to know that one trusty heart is left near Ludovic. But I fear. What can you do for my Ludovic against those cruel villains, the Count and Rollmar?" She turned away in an access of heart-chilling despair, then next moment had recovered herself.

"Come, let us not lose another instant," she said resolutely. "You must find me an escort among the soldiers. Surely there are some who will run this risk for their Princess, for any woman, indeed, who is in such a dire strait as I."

He told her of certain good fellows there whose acquaintance he had made in the guard-room, and who, he was sure, would be ready to risk their lives in this service for her.

"If all goes well, they shall not be losers for standing by me in my extremity. At least they are human; Rollmar is a fiend."

They came to the three horses—bitter suggestion of their failure—mounted, and made their way towards the spot where the men were encamped. Ompertz's thoughts were divided between admiration for this courageous girl and sadness at the thought of how small was her chance of success.

But the affair, he told himself, was too difficult for his poor brain; he could see no light through the darkness; only hope that chance, after leaving them so terribly in the lurch, might once again stand their friend and accomplish what seemed beyond the scope of every imaginable plan.

By a difficult path they arrived presently, after many a hindrance from wood and rock, within a stone's throw of where the troops lay encamped. Leaving Ruperta in a place of safety, or, at least, in concealment, Ompertz went forward to find his men for the purpose.

Half an hour later he, with many misgivings, had taken leave of the Princess who, with an escort of three stout fellows, started off through the forest to strike the nearest point of the main road to Beroldstein. Ruperta had supplemented Ompertz's explanation by an appeal to the men to stand by her in her distress. She knew, she said, the risk her escort would be running; how those who guarded her flight would do so at the peril of their lives, and she would accept no service that, with this knowledge, was not freely given. But Ompertz, a shrewd judge of, at any rate, certain characters, had made no mistake in choosing the men. Their records were not, perhaps, of the best repute, but they were three staunch dare-devils, who would think no more of giving up their prospects and lives at a word from the Princess than of passing their mug of beer to a thirsty comrade. They had instantly and heartily sworn to see her through her long ride, or give their lives in her service, and she felt she need have no fear of their failing her. So they set off.

The first part of the journey was slow and difficult enough; however, one of the men knew the country and was confident that they could not lose their way. Nevertheless, the darkness of the forest hampered their progress, but, with the dawn, the track, too, grew lighter as the party emerged upon a hilly stretch of heath.

"We are now but a mile from the great road," said the man who knew the way.

They could push on now at a smart pace; time, Rupert felt, was everything, and all through the long hours of darkness her impatience had been torture. It was not many minutes before the broad coach-road came in sight beyond a belt of woodland which fringed it. Just before they reached it, hastening over the grassy road, one of the men, who was riding a few paces ahead, held up a warning hand.

As they reined up, the ring of horses' hoofs fell upon their ears. The man quickly threw himself from the saddle and crept forward to the corner whence he could get a view of the road. Next instant he came rushing back, motioning them to turn aside among the trees.

"Horsemen coming fast! Quick! They may be after Her Highness. Quick, under the trees!"

They had scarcely taken cover, when the other party rode by at a quick pace. Four men, with a fifth at their head, riding in haste and looking neither to the right nor left. The figure of the leader was unmistakable.

"It is Count Irromar," Rupert exclaimed under her breath. "In pursuit of me."

She was wrong. It was the Count, but he was not in search of her. He was riding post-haste to Beroldstein on business of his own.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT THE USURPER'S COURT

IT was with considerable surprise that King Ferdinand of Drax-Beroldstein, as yet scarcely settled comfortably into his snatched dignity, heard that the notorious law-defier and outlaw, Count Irromar, was at the palace, asking for a private audience on business of the utmost importance. Had the King been a strong man, or one who felt his position unassailable, he would probably have handed the noble brigand over to his officers of justice, congratulating himself on getting the most troublesome and dangerous of his subjects so cheaply in his power. But Ferdinand was neither. He was a weak man who had been unable to resist the chance, urged upon him by designing favourites, to seize a crown which for the moment seemed to be left without a wearer, and, having put it on his head, was now trembling inwardly at his own temerity. He could afford to despise no man, and his only strength came not from within, but was forced on him by circumstances from without. It was almost a weak man's strength of desperation; no one can be so strong by fits and starts as your thoroughly feeble character who dare not show his weakness.

Then there was the haunting mystery of Ludwig's disappearance. At every waking moment, Ferdinand told himself that his cousin was surely dead, but in his dreams, he was alive and seeking retribution. In spite of the assurances of all his friends and flatterers, Ferdinand

found himself doubting every one, from his ministers to the soldiery. He dreaded to read in every new-comer's face the solution of the mystery, the end of his day. Still, he had cast his die, the boats were burned behind him—foolishly, he told himself, since he might, by constituting himself regent, have grasped the power clean-handed—and now, as it was, there seemed nothing for it but to assume a resolution which he had not, and to keep by force what treachery had won. It had all seemed so easy and desirable, this pursuit of power, this scheming for a throne, in the days of preparation; when suddenly the *coup* had to be made, and responsibility to be assumed, it was not so pleasant.

Doubtless it was a shrewd knowledge of the usurper's character that gave Irromar confidence to put his head into the lion's mouth. At the same time, he was well armed, both for attack and defence, with the knowledge he held.

On receiving the somewhat astounding message, Ferdinand hesitated. His first impulse was that of the bully; to order the arrest of this formidable outlaw. Then his chronic feeling of insecurity prompted him to hear what the visitor had to communicate. Such a man had not come boldly there without good reason, and he could easily be arrested after the interview. Accordingly, he gave orders for a guard to be in readiness and for the Count to be admitted to an audience.

With an affectation of homage which scarcely concealed his bold confidence, Irromar entered the royal presence, and, having bowed low, stood before the Usurper in the easy fearlessness of conscious power. Ferdinand had a set frown on his sharp, gambler's face; he might as well have thought to melt a rock by frowning at it, as thereby to intimidate the strong, reckless nature confronting him. Perhaps he felt this, as, with an effort at self-assertion, he bid the Count say what had brought him thither.

"I have come on a matter which is for your Majesty's ear alone," was the sturdy reply.

Ferdinand affected to hesitate, then motioned his curious circle to a distance. "Now speak out, Count, and briefly."

But Irromar dropped his strong vibrating voice almost to a whisper, as he bent forward to the King. "It is of your Majesty's cousin, Prince Ludwig, that I have come here to speak!"

He watched closely the effect of his words, and saw nothing but a curious, indefinable expression flash across his hearer's face. But it was enough. And although Ferdinand's next remark was made in a tone of studied indifference, Count Irromar knew that the hit was more than a touch.

"Well? You know, perhaps, what has become of him? His fate?"

Irromar bowed assent. "He is at this moment in my power: a prisoner in my castle in the Teufelswald."

If the news gave Ferdinand an uncomfortable thrill, he did not show it. The pale face, with its stiff yellow moustache and beard, remained impassive. Only, in the eyes there was a light of fierce concern. Perhaps, after all, the knowledge that one phase of his uncertainty was at an end came as a relief to him.

"Well?" Ferdinand had now to use his cunning; he would let suggestions come from the other side.

"I thought," the Count answered readily, "that the information might be of vital interest to your Majesty."

"In what way, Count?"

"It is not for me to dictate the use your Majesty should make of it." His guard was good; it would have to be drawn out and weakened.

"And yet I dare be sworn," Ferdinand returned, with his cunning smile, "that you had a use for it in your mind, or you would hardly have ventured hither."

Irromar understood the invitation. "Perhaps, sire,

a use which may be to the advantage of both of us," he replied coolly.

Ferdinand was leaning sideways in his chair, with his hand playing at his sparse beard; it was a demeanour of sly reserve. "We should like to have your views, Count, as to this double advantage," he said.

"Certainly, sire," Irromar replied, playing his part with every outward sign of deference. "You will, perhaps, graciously pardon me if I express them too bluntly; but the position and opportunity are critical, and plain speaking fits them best."

Ferdinand gave a quick, impatient nod of authority, and the Count proceeded.

"The Prince, is, as I have said, my prisoner, secretly hidden away where no man, unless I choose, can ever find him. He fell into my hands by an accident, and the fact is practically a secret which need never be known, save to those whose interest would be to ignore it. To all intents, he is dead and buried. It is for your Majesty to say whether he shall ever come to life again."

He paused. "Go on," Ferdinand said curtly.

"As to your Majesty's interest and wishes in the matter," Irromar continued, in the same tone of guarded deference, which yet seemed to mock as it flattered, "I do not presume to make a suggestion, or anticipate what may be in your Majesty's mind. All that I wish to put forward is my hearty willingness to serve you, sire, in this matter. And, that you may trust me."

Ferdinand, revolving keenly the crisis, smiled with a purposeful scorn which hid the inner working of his mind. "Confidence in Count Irromar is a somewhat unreasonable demand, methinks," he observed.

"Without a guarantee, yes?" was the ready rejoinder. "It suggests the second and minor advantage of the situation: that which affects my poor self."

"Ah?" Ferdinand was indifferently curious. Per-

haps he felt he could, if expedient, secure that guarantee without the Count's active co-operation.

"The very disrepute of my antecedents," Irromar went on, with the confidence arising from a strong position, "is, although it naturally appears to the contrary, the very guarantee for my liberty. Your Majesty is justly incredulous; but let me explain away the apparent absurdity. In a word, I am sick of my present outlawry, legal and moral. My one great desire is to rehabilitate myself, to take up once more the position to which I was born, and which, in my hot-headed madness, I chose to throw away. There is but one hand from which I can hope to receive back what I have squandered, the good name, the noble position; but one countenance to which I can look for pardon and favour. If once that hand is held out, that countenance turned favourably towards me, am I likely to reject that royal generosity and return to my dog's life? Now, sire, have I made my meaning plan?"

"You have—quite plain," Ferdinand answered. Then he paused, his manner seeming to command silence on the other's part as well. Once or twice he glanced sharply at the Count's face, that strong, keenly determined face. He was scheming rapidly, vaguely, uncomfortably. The crisis for which he had been preparing himself was, now that it had suddenly arisen, rather more than he could confidently meet. And his discomposure was due less to the urgency of the situation than to the manner of its announcement, and, above all, to the man who set it so boldly before him. For during the whole interview he had been oppressed and irritated by the sense of his inferiority to the Count, an inferiority none the less galling in that it was of evil; such better qualities as they may have possessed did not enter into the question. This man's personality and character were dominant; their owner looked down from a higher plane of evil upon the weak tool of political intriguers, seated uneasily on his stolen throne.

But, apart from purely personal considerations, the manifest superiority forced this question upon Ferdinand. Would it be wise for him to put himself in the power of this resolute, cunning spirit? The Count's argument was plausible enough, but what deep scheme might not lurk behind it? Had Irromar shown himself a weaker man, Ferdinand would probably have employed him to put his awkward cousin out of the way, and then taken the obvious means of securing his ever-lasting silence. But, somehow, as he looked at his visitor and mentally gauged him, he could not see in him an easy victim. Still, for the moment, power was on the King's side, only he must, indeed, be careful how he let it slip away. At any rate, the matter was too difficult for an off-hand decision; he would take counsel with a more astute mind than his own; as it was, he and this master-spirit were unevenly matched. And in the meantime he would gratify and avenge his wounded vanity by showing his power.

So, with a deepening frown, he at length broke the tense pause.

"You are a bold man, Count, to come here and make this proposition to us. For what may have prompted you to this temerity, the wild life you have led may, perhaps, be responsible."

Both men gave a smile, and the Count's produced the effect which the King's vainly intended.

"Nobody," Ferdinand continued, "but yourself would have conceived so bold a step. No one in any but our position would have seemed to invite it."

"Your Majesty will hardly blame me for seizing a chance so momentous to both," Irromar returned, bluffly.

"At least," Ferdinand replied, guardedly, "we cannot blame you for hastening to impart to us news so important. That may weigh with us in the view we shall take in our judgment of you."

The Count was quick enough to see the line Ferdinand

was taking, and, with the impetuosity of a strong, impatient nature, he set about brushing aside the barrier of shuffling behind which the King was entrenching himself.

"There is scarcely time or room for the question of judgment to come in, sire," he said, emphatically. I am a man of action, accustomed to go straightway to the point at issue. This matter clearly admits of no temporizing. Your Majesty's judgment of me is at the moment of little consequence. My all-important quality is that I am the jailer of the one person in the world whose condition must supremely affect your Majesty's welfare."

"That," replied Ferdinand, with a purposeful show of scorn, "is a matter upon which we do not invite your opinion. The King of Drax-Beroldstein must not be dictated to by the outlaw of the Teufelswald."

The Count flushed purple. "The King——," he began hotly, then checked the words at his lips. Doubtless he saw Ferdinand's object in provoking him, and resolved to meet him at his own game. "I should be the last man to presume to usurp the functions of your Majesty's advisers," he said, with a significant smile, "or interfere, unbidden, with aught that concerns you. I fear that already, in my zeal, I may have been guilty of officiousness. Is it, then, your pleasure, sire, that I set Prince Ludwig free?"

Ferdinand had settled his course, and, that once accomplished, could keep to it firmly enough. "That," he answered, with an assumption of dignity, "is a question for our advisers. It is not to be determined in a moment, certainly not at the suggestion of Count Irromar. We are not unmindful of your zeal, Count, and shall take it into consideration in dealing with you. But for the moment we must, as you will understand, at least make a show of doing our duty. You have set our laws at defiance, you have been the very scourge of a wide district of our

kingdom. You"—and here a peculiar sneering smile spread over his face—"you, who have taken upon yourself so boldly to advise us, will recognize that we cannot afford to reward your long list of black deeds with immediate tokens of our favour. It would raise an easy and hideous suspicion. It would at once brand us as our cousin's murderer. No! Policy of State must stand before all things, and that policy demands your arrest."

All through the speech Irromar's face had been growing darker, and at the last word he made a swift gesture of rage.

"Arrest? Your Majesty is joking!"

It was all he could say, but there was clearly no jest in Ferdinand's crafty face as he signed to the group that, in scarcely veiled curiosity, stood apart. He had given his orders, and the men were ready. At a word from an alert official, Count Irromar, inwardly raging, and frowning threats, found himself surrounded and a prisoner.

"Your Majesty," he cried darkly, "will do well to consider this step you are taking."

Ferdinand waved his hand with a gesture of dismissal. "We will see you again, Count; you understand?" he said significantly, as he rose and walked away.

CHAPTER XXIX

FERDINAND'S SECOND VISITOR

THE man to whom Ferdinand turned in his perplexity was one Eugen Morvan. It was he who had practically set him on the throne, since he had been the instigator of the course of intrigue which had rendered possible the *coup* by which the crown had been seized. A fat, sensual looking man of five and forty, one who, to the Church's certain advantage, had stopped just short of becoming a priest, and, having thrown aside his deacon's cassock, had, by devious paths, found his way to the Court, there, by luck, assurance, an easy-going philosophy and assiduous flattery, to attach himself to the person and fortunes of the Prince who stood next but one to the throne.

That his patron should be so nearly a power, and yet be none, was of itself enough to make it certain that the intriguing, insinuating spirit at his elbow would never rest from prompting him to amend the accident of birth. And when the idea had been accepted and the scheme launched, Morvan had proved that his lazy, self-indulgent exterior masked a spirit of daring conception and resource. He was ambitious, too, from, of course, the most material of worldly considerations. He had a bad man's lust for power; power for evil, for selfish ends, for the gratification of every whim, from revenge to appetite. To have attempted to attach himself to Ludwig would have been absolutely futile. Bad men are keenly sensi-

tive to their affinities and their antipathies. Ludwig would never have looked at that unctuous, knavish face but to order it from his court. Morvan knew that well, and hated him accordingly. Besides, to the rightful heir to the throne he could have been of no possible use. There could be no call there for the intriguing arts by which he sought to make himself indispensable. But when once he had Ferdinand committed to the scheme of usurpation—which, by an unlooked-for piece of luck, Ludwig's mysterious absence so strangely favoured—that Prince was in his power; bound to him body and soul. Ferdinand dared not go back when the evil genius at his side urged him forward, and the result had indeed justified the confidence of the daring pilot who had seized the helm of his fortune.

"He is found."

Morvan had guessed it already. "I was sure of it, sire. Nothing else could have brought that ruffian to Court."

Briefly, not without a sign of agitation, Ferdinand told what he had heard. It was the way of his shrewd adviser never to make light of dangers, however insignificant, lest he should lose the credit of surmounting them. So his face was grave as he listened.

"So the crisis has come at last," he observed, with an air of confidence in his ability to meet it. "The time for final action has arrived. It is well. You have acted wisely, sire, in caging the wild beast. What is to be the next move?"

Morvan was far too shrewd to force his advice gratuitously upon his patron, knowing if he held back his counsel it would be surely demanded. And when he gave it, it was cleverly done with an air of merely amplifying his master's suggestions and putting them into practical shape.

"It is on that," Ferdinand answered, "that I must have your advice. We must tread warily now."

"Your Majesty's first steps have been cautious to admiration," Morvan returned, with what seemed a half sneering laugh in his eye. "Yes. We have the game in hand, so far. We must be careful not to throw away the advantage."

"We can hardly employ this desperado to put him out of the way, and recognise the service by receiving him at our Court."

The speech was tentative; Morvan, though he so understood it, tactfully ignored the tone.

"Your Majesty has rightly seen that course would be preposterous," he replied craftily. "Happily, there is no need for it. Yes; it would indeed be a false step to put yourself in the power of that unprincipled bravo. You would never be safe for an hour. But we—that is, your Majesty's position is strong enough without running such a monstrous risk. The Ministers are yours, the Court is yours, the army is yours, and I make bold to assert from positive knowledge, from trusty reports, that the people are yours. What, then, is left for Ludwig, supposing, as is scarcely probable, that he has not already fallen a victim to that wolf's fangs?"

"But, if not, he is still to be feared."

Morvan's look was darkly significant. "It will be our fault if ever he is in a position to trouble us."

Ferdinand's cunning eyes met the other's responsively. "Then what better means could we employ than this discredited outlaw; the most natural and irresponsible instrument——?"

"And the most dangerous," Morvan put in, pursing his lips and shaking his head. "Say we give him a free hand, and dangle royal favour before him. We should attach to the Court a restless, scheming, ambitious spirit, the utterly unscrupulous holder of a dangerous secret, and, above all, a man of whom the constant sight would be hateful to your Majesty. And to attempt to put him out of sight would be full of risk. No! For butcher's

work, one must live the life of a butcher. Blood is no sure cement for keeping on a crown. We have no Rollmar here, and so may well abjure his methods."

"Our scheme and victory have so far been bloodless," said Ferdinand meditatively.

"Long may they remain so," replied his counsellor, heartily. "No, sire, I have a better plan than this brigand's."

"Ah, yes?"

"If, as we believe, the people are with you it is because you have gained a popularity which the absent one has forfeited. The greater fool he. Ludwig has got himself into an awkward corner; we know nothing of that. Let him extricate himself from the tiger's den as best he can. It will be certainly difficult, perhaps impossible, if report speaks truly of the Teufelswald tiger's methods. It might, perhaps, even be politic to send, not too soon, a small expedition to his rescue. It will look generous, and the mob loves generosity—in others—much as it disrelishes the quality inside its own skin. Who knows? Supposing our dear cousin should be rescued alive; he is Quixotic; terms may be made; at worst the expedition can do your Majesty no harm. But if the whisper of foul play should spread, as it would like wildfire, I would not wager on the crown being on your head that day week."

Ferdinand had brightened as he listened; doubtless he was relieved at the necessity for blood-guiltiness being set aside. And he felt that the alternative plan was shrewd, too.

"My dear Eugen, you are wonderful," he exclaimed, fervently. "Yes; we will follow your advice. Ludwig is scarcely in a position to be formidable, and it will be our fault if we let him become so. And in the meantime, we keep the Count where his knowledge cannot leak out?"

A look came over Morvan's face which showed that

the mild course he had advised did not altogether spring from his character. "It might be well," he said, with a touch of brutal significance, "to shut his mouth for ever. Anyhow, having caught and caged the ferocious brute, it would be madness to let him out again. And—yes, his life is many times forfeit. He may as well pay the penalty. No harm in that. It would be a popular stroke."

As the Count's fate was thus shortly decided, a second and even yet more extraordinary message than that which had announced him was brought to the King. No less a person than the Princess Ruperta of Waldavia had arrived at the Palace and was urgently asking an audience. After the first sense of astonishment, Ferdinand came shrewdly to connect this visit with his cousin's fate, though the relation was not easy to see. Morvan was of the same opinion, as, at the King's invitation, he accompanied him to the room where the interview was to take place.

To Ruperta the first anxious glance at the two men was unprepossessing enough. It was, however, no time to be influenced by impressions. The desperate chance of saving her lover filled her thoughts, as, raising herself from a suppliant's obeisance, she stood in her splendid beauty before Ferdinand. He, looking at her with eyes which could see nothing else, spoke a few words of gracious welcome, and inquired to what he owed the honour of her visit and how he could serve her, while Morvan's dark, unfathomable gaze was unnoticed, as he stood speculating how this turn might be or not be to his advantage.

The story was soon told; it was already known to its hearers, but it was Morvan who was the quicker to comprehend that the teller was unaware of her lover's real name and rank. It was astounding, for a while almost incredible, but it gradually forced itself upon his conviction. Ferdinand was puzzled, and a trifle less quick at

divining the truth; he once had on his tongue the words which would have opened her eyes, but his confidant, alertly on the watch, interposed so significantly that he suddenly understood.

"It is to your Majesty that in my extremity I have turned," poor Ruperta pleaded, perhaps with failing hope, as she looked at the usurper's face with its utter absence of magnanimity. "There is no help or hope for me in my own land. If my father would befriend us, Rollmar would not let him; for the servant, I shame to speak it, though it is well known, is more powerful than his master. He hates me, and has marked down for death the man I love; it is the fate of all who cross his path."

"He designed your hand, Princess, for our cousin Ludwig, unhappily lost or dead, did he not?" Ferdinand observed, disguising the object of his question under an appearance of sympathetic interest.

"It was," she replied, "his abominable disregard for my happiness that drove me from my home. It was that also, I imagine, that made Prince Ludwig a wanderer, since he seems to detest this scheme of Rollmar's as much as I."

"Then, Princess, you have no idea as to what became of poor Ludwig; whether he be living or dead? You have never seen him?" Ferdinand asked, in simulated concern.

"I have never seen Prince Ludwig. He has taken care of that," she answered, with a trace of bitterness. "He need not have feared," she added proudly. "There was no need to efface himself from human knowledge. But perhaps, if he imagined me so poor a thing as to be a puppet in Rollmar's hands, he was right to run any risk to avoid me."

"He knows not what he has missed," said Ferdinand, with greedy admiration. "Happily, perhaps, he will never know it now."

"He is dead?" she asked, with womanly regret.

"There is little doubt of it."

"And the man on whose account I have come to plead with you?" she urged. "The subject and soldier of your Majesty, who has braved Rollmar and faced more than once the death prepared for him; you will not let him die?"

The covetous eyes were feasting on her beauty, flushed as it was with the eagerness of entreaty. He roused himself from his preoccupation of contemplating her face to answer her words.

"Not if we can help it. But, you know, Princess, that Count Irromar is no easy man to deal with."

"That is true. Yet surely the King of Beroldstein is stronger than he?"

"Let us hope so," he said mechanically, as he followed out Ludovic's stratagem and its reason.

"You say Rollmar is already there with a force?" Morvan put in. "And he could not help you?"

"To rescue the man whose death he constantly seeks? Scarcely. It is from him that I have fled."

"From Rollmar?"

"He has designs upon my liberty. Perhaps—who knows?—upon my life, too, rather than that I should bring his scheme to naught."

"And so," Ferdinand said, eagerly, "you have come to me for protection as well. It will be no less a pleasure than an honour to me to afford you an asylum, my Princess, though in so doing I provoke the ill-will of a powerful neighbour and put myself at issue with the most pitiless spirit in Europe. You have appealed to my chivalry, cousin; you have claimed my protection and help; I lay them all, and myself, at your feet."

He advanced, and with an excess of gallantry, bent low and kissed her hand. It seemed as though his touch chilled her; perhaps she felt instinctively that he was false; knew, woman-like, that her cause appealed to him

less than her beauty. But in her desperate eagerness, she could not stay to weigh that. It was enough for the moment that she could compel his interest.

"Every hour," she urged, as his lips touched her hand, "every moment is precious, since this brave life hangs on it. I know how unreasonable is my request, but my joy would be great in proportion if your Majesty would speak the word of rescue."

"We will take measures at once," Ferdinand assured her, with a show of alacrity. But he seemed as though he could not take his eyes from her; a poor guarantee that he would exert himself in her lover's interest. Morvan, watching him, read his mind, and laughed to himself.

It was quickly arranged that Ruperta should be lodged at the house of one of the principal ladies of the Court, and thither she was escorted with the respect due to her rank, Ferdinand, as he took his leave of her, reiterating the assurance of his readiness to serve her, which was so far from his intention.

When he was left alone with Morvan, the evil eyes of the two schemers met in mutual understanding. As Ferdinand seemed to hang back from declaring his thoughts and purposes, his henchman, reading them surely, led the way.

"A royal Princess, indeed," he observed, with unctuous enthusiasm. "You might do worse, sire, than to acquire your cousin's bride as well as his crown."

"I was thinking so," the reply came with ready eagerness. "That alliance would do more to settle me firmly on the throne than any other conceivable plan."

"It would at once and for ever ensure the support of Rollmar."

"It would. And with that, our position would be strength itself."

"Quite unassailable. The old fox wants the crowns united. For the flesh and blood that happen to wear

them he cares nothing. I rejoice, sire, that chance has thrown in your way an opportunity as glorious as it is unexpected."

Not a word would the crafty counsellor speak of the most urgent factor, his master's personal feelings. He was sure enough of them.

"And Ludwig?"

As he spoke the word, the King glanced with dark suggestion at his favourite.

Morvan gave a shrug and an evil laugh. "You must keep your word to the Princess, sire."

Ferdinand read the mocking words by the light of the laugh. "While he lives——" he paused significantly.

"Yes," said Morvan, following the thought, "Princess Ruperta is a resolute young woman. I think it might be well to release Count Irromar with a hint. With Rollmar for a close ally, even that dare-devil ceases to be a danger."

CHAPTER XXX

ROLLMAR'S WAY

WHEN, early in the morning, Rollmar prepared to set forth on his return, he was surprised, and yet more enraged, to find that Princess Ruperta was not forthcoming. That the Count had left the castle he was aware, since his host had overnight excused his attendance, and taken his leave on plea of urgent business. Still, faithless and unscrupulous as the experienced reader of men had clearly seen the Count to be, he had still been far from anticipating such a defiant piece of treachery as this development of the affair seemed to indicate. He gave Gomer, the old major-domo, a very unpleasant quarter of an hour's cross-examination, but failed to shake, either by threats or cunning, his repeated assurance that his master's departure had nothing to do with the Princess's disappearance. The Count, he reiterated, had ridden forth alone save for an escort of four men. The Princess had, he was sure, contrived to leave the castle some time before.

The Chancellor, accustomed to weigh probabilities, decided that the man was lying. It was far easier for him to believe the Count than the Princess capable of playing that trick upon him. Moreover, she could hardly have escaped from the castle without the Count's connivance. It was true, Ludovic was a possible factor in the business, but why should Irromar play into his hands, even to spite Rollmar? Little as the Count might appreciate

being worsted by that astute old brain, he was less kindly disposed towards the man who not only was his favoured rival, but who had so singularly defeated his evil plans. No. Rapidly reviewing in his mind the turn of affairs by the light of his knowledge of the Count's stubborn, treacherous character, he satisfied himself that he had either spirited the Princess away, perhaps to some hiding-place in the mountains, or what was more likely, they were concealed in a secret apartment under that very roof. The crisis was as urgent as it was exasperating. Ruperta's reputation had an immense, an especial value to him as an important factor in his plans, and this prolongation of a discreditable escapade was inexpressibly annoying. So, waving aside the seneschal's protests and assurances, he demanded that the Princess should be forthwith produced. Gomer could only shrug his shoulders hopelessly.

"I will give you a quarter of an hour," said the angry old man in his accustomed tone of command, which his fierce eyes ever rendered terrifyingly effective. "If by that time the Princess is not brought into this room I will first search every corner of this robber's den, and then burn it down over your heads."

There was an ugly look of half-restrained defiance in Gomer's eyes as he replied protestingly, "I cannot, Excellency, bring the Princess to you, because she is not within these walls. As to your threat, I can only say that, in the absence of my master, the Count, I, having the temporary care and charge of this property, will take upon myself to resist your intention with the best means in my power."

Rollmar, eyeing him sharply, gave a scornful laugh. "I understand," he said, pointedly. "It is as I thought. You have your instructions. Your courage is inspired, doubtless, by a fear of the arch-bandit, your master, not so very far away. Very well, then you take the consequences, the most important of which to yourself will be

that in a very few hours your carcass will be hanging outside the gate which, in your blind impudence, you think to keep against me."

Gomer looked for a moment as though he would spring at the old minister and draw first blood anyhow. His life had probably been lawless, and his days passed in a state of defiance and danger. But there was something about Rollmar, an indefinable power and resolution, showing itself in the glitter of his eyes, the calmly assured dignity of his manner, which restrained him, as it had held back many another man. The light—unquenchable, it seemed—that burnt in that decrepit lamp held the desperado's spirit under a mysterious spell. He could only repeat doggedly—

"Your Excellency may try to carry out your threat, but its certain failure will cost more than your Excellency dreams of."

"We shall see," retorted Rollmar, turning away. "It is time the country was purged of this plague-spot."

So, with quiet resolution, he left the castle, none daring to stay him, for it had been whispered that to oppose this old man, whose reputation for guile and cunning strength was world-wide, was more than even their master dared to do.

The Count was a very clever man; but, when he rode off in hot haste on a project that touched him so nearly, he overlooked the fact that he was leaving a much cleverer man behind him, and his house and its secrets practically at his mercy. So full was Irromar's mind of the opportunity for a bold stroke which had so strangely arisen that he neglected to anticipate what might logically happen in his absence. At the same time, it never occurred to him that Ruperta would put her liberty to any use which might have a disastrous bearing upon the very plans he was so eagerly revolving. Knowing her to be free, he imagined nothing worse than that she might, with Ompertz for her protector, return to her

father, and perhaps plead vainly for her lover's rescue. But that Rollmar should suppose, when she did not join him, that she was still a prisoner in the castle was a contingency which he had in his haste altogether overlooked.

So, in the grey dawn, Rollmar left the castle fuming and vindictive, and, as luck would have it, the first person he encountered outside was Captain Ompertz. The soldier of fortune had been in a somewhat despairing mood. For several hours, from the moment, that is, when Ruperta had ridden away leaving him to watch the situation on the spot, he had untiringly devoted himself to making a thorough examination of such parts of the castle as he could reach, straining every faculty to light upon a way of getting into some sort of communication with Ludwig. But, though reckless of his own safety, he risked his neck many times in his desperate endeavors to get a clue to the prisoner's whereabouts, all his efforts were futile.

The Castle of Teufelswald had been built for a purpose, and was a worthy product of its designer's cunning brain. Dovetailed with the rock into which it was built, it presented at all points, save in front, an uncompromising fastness of blankness and silence. When once its postern doors of rock were shut and barred, the back of the building could defy observation and assault; it was, from the rear, at least, impregnable. It was in vain that Ompertz set himself to climb tree after tree in the hope of spying from above some indication of what to a daring man might be a vulnerable point, not to be detected from the ground. There was nothing which tempted even his desperation to try for an entrance; no light, no sound. But one thing he did see, and that was of moment; the setting forth of the Count and his attendants. Naturally he supposed it was in pursuit of the Princess; but he could do nothing there in her behalf, only rejoice in the thought that she had a long start, and ejaculate a fer-

vent prayer that she might keep it. And, indeed, had he been minded to try to delay the Count, it would have been impossible to have intercepted the little party, who passed quickly through the door and rode off without pause along the woodland path.

Having convinced himself that there was no chance of getting at Ludovic's prison from that part of the castle, Ompertz, disheartened and weary from the want of rest, of which his enforced vigilance had deprived him, gave up his fruitless endeavour, and dragged himself towards the valley where Rollmar's men lay. The light of a chilly dawn was beginning to spread over the forest and to force its way in grey streaks up the wood-lined valleys and gorges, turning the black masses of pines into an indistinct greenish blue, as the soldier, the very shadow of himself in his utter exhaustion, lay down on an invitingly sheltered bank, and, careless of his safety, fell fast asleep. From this he was roused by a voice, uncomfortably familiar, calling, "Captain Ompertz!"

Half awakened, yet, for very weariness, unable to open his eyes, he told himself it was a dream. But the summons was insistently repeated. "Captain Ompertz!" In a moment the truth flashed his mind into complete wakefulness and he started half up. Over him stood a man; one of the most dreaded personalities in Europe.

"Up, Captain! I have work for you," Rollmar said, with inscrutable face.

Ompertz sprang to his feet, wondering, as he looked inquiringly at the saturnine old face, what the work could be. Was the pitiless Chancellor minded to take vengeance on him for his share in the elopement? Then he told himself that they were man to man, and so fell to wondering that Rollmar should be there at that hour alone.

"How can I serve you, Excellency?" He was now wide awake, and anticipation made him ignore his fatigue.

"I have," said Rollmar, "a difficult affair on hand."

"Yes, Excellency?"

The other seemed to regard his eagerness with the half contemptuous amusement a man will have for zeal to which he himself in a like position would be insensible.

"You are acquainted with this robber's lair," he gave an indicating jerk of the head, "the castle yonder?"

"I know every foot of it, from outside, Excellency."

"Is it strong enough to defy assault?"

"From behind it could hold out against almost any force without artillery."

"H'm! So the attack must be made in front?"

"Assuredly, Excellency. And even there it should be a tough nut to crack."

"Nevertheless, Captain, it must be cracked, and without delay."

Ompertz, looking at him in some wonder and a certain vague joy, was struck by the imperious determination in the old man's face.

"Yes, Excellency. It would be no bad thing."

Rollmar nodded. This ever-ready soldier of fortune afforded him some slight interest and amusement, and the acute judge of character could see the man's honesty, and a deep-lying nobility under the wandering mercenary's rough exterior. "The fellow, this Count Irromar, has played me a trick, and must pay for it," he continued. Somehow Ompertz's open nature seemed to invite confidence; an ordinary captain would have got nothing beyond bare orders. "So this castle," he went on, "must be pulled or burned down about his head. And at once. Delay is out of the question, since I have reason to believe the Princess Ruperta is still a prisoner there."

Ompertz had it on the tip of his tongue to reassure the Chancellor on that point, but checked the word in time, with a thrill at the danger into which he had so nearly been led. For in his mind was a great joy at the

thought that if Lüdwig were still alive this action might mean his release, surely the only chance left. If he knew that the Princess was no longer in the castle, Rollmar, a man above all not given to waste of energy or zeal, would doubtless abandon his project of sacking the place, finding it, moreover, no bad policy to leave the ousted Prince to his fate and the Count's mercy. Neither did Ompertz judge it advisable to tell Rollmar of the Count's departure, since he might then doubt whether the Princess were, after all, within the walls he proposed to raze. So, keeping his own counsel, he placed with alacrity his best service at the Chancellor's disposal, and they went on towards the camp to bring up their array.

An hour later, the force advanced threateningly upon the castle, the front of which was now, in anticipation of an attack, barricaded against their approach. The windows were screened by iron shutters, and before the door a sort of portcullis was let down. Rollmar smiled grimly when he saw the ready preparations for defence.

"He has expected this for many a day," he said; "it has come none too soon."

Ompertz, to whom, as having the best knowledge of the place, the attack was entrusted, led the men tactically up the terraces. Having advanced, less, perhaps, to his surprise than Rollmar's, without opposition right up to the building, a bugle was blown, and the place summoned to surrender. An iron shutter opened and old Gomer appeared.

"This castle," he said, "will never surrender so long as there is a man left to garrison it. One word, gentlemen, before you commit yourselves to this vain business: I declare to you that you are greatly in error in attacking us. The Princess is not here, she is not within these walls, nor is there a soul here who knows where she is. Were these my last words I could not say otherwise. I swear to you before Heaven the lady is not in our keeping."

Ompertz, who alone knew he spoke the truth, gave him the lie direct:

"Out, you lying old hound!" he cried. "If your word be true let us in to prove it."

"That I cannot do," the seneschal retorted fiercely. "We have had enough of such undesirable guests as yourself."

"So you convict yourself of falsehood," Ompertz returned. "The Princess is within, and we will have her out; so the sooner you open your door the better for you."

For reply, the shutter was drawn across the window with a significant bang, and the parley was at an end.

Had Ompertz not been aware that the lord of Teufelswald was absent, he would have been far less hopeful than he was of taking the stronghold by assault. As it was, he had a pretty shrewd idea that the garrison was far from being a strong one either in numbers or spirit. Nearly a dozen fighting men had been killed or wounded in the two encounters with Ludwig and himself. Four had ridden forth with the Count; surely not many could remain, and those were without their chief, who, besides setting a vivid example of reckless daring, knew how to supplement the courage of his followers by a lively fear of the consequences of defeat. But he, worth a score of his humble bravos, was happily away, and Ompertz had promptly taken care to send a detachment of his men round to the rock door to intercept his possible return.

A short consultation among the leaders of the attacking party resulted in the conclusion that there was but one feasible way of gaining admittance, and that was to batter in the principal door. That looked a formidable task enough; the massive iron-bound oak was manifestly intended to provide against assault, and then there was the heavy net-work of beams forming the portcullis to beat down, even before the door itself was reached. But,

given sufficient strength, anything is physically possible, and with several score of men at his back, Ompertz felt he could laugh at the Count's iron-bound beams, which could have defied a mere dozen assailants for many a day. The first idea of the attacking party was to set fire to the oaken barrier, but the wood was too little exposed to catch alight easily, and, moreover, the contingency had been provided against by the contrivance of a long cistern above the archway from which at any moment the portcullis could be drenched with water.

But, though fire might be of no avail, the united weight and sinews of a considerable body of men made a force which not even Count Irromar's barricades could withstand. A tree-trunk was utilized as a battering-ram, and the attack began in earnest. It was not without its difficulties. The soldiers swinging the huge log were exposed to an oblique fire from certain loop-holes commanding the approach to the entrance, and several men fell, fewer, however, than would probably have been accounted for had the defence been conducted with more spirit than seemed to be the case. Their exposure to this galling fire had the effect of making the attacking party redouble their efforts; the portcullis began to crack and show signs of giving way beneath the tremendous battering of the swinging tree-trunk; the blows, planted with insistence and precision, increased in effect, and made the yielding of the strong beams only a question of time.

At length, with a crash, the portcullis was staved in, and, with a shout, the men broke through and rushed forward eagerly to take the same measures with the door. The shots from the loop-holes, which had become more frequent and wildly aimed, upon this almost ceased. The soldiers, being now close under the walls, were in a less exposed position, but, apart from that, there were signs that the garrison were either demoralized, or were preparing some new scheme of defence.

In a very few minutes the improvised battering-ram was brought into position to play upon the door, and its thundering blows sent back echoing booms from within. The men, now confident of easily forcing an entry, were laughing, and applying themselves to their task with a will in order to make short work of it. Suddenly there was a warning cry from those behind who were farthest from the walls and, before the foremost men could realize what was going to happen, a huge piece of rock fell in their midst. Fortunately it came down just between the two files of men who were working the battering-ram; it crashed plump on the wood, sending it from the men's grasp to the ground, and, at the same time, giving many of the workers time to spring aside and so avoid being struck by it. Several, however, who had wound the ropes round their hands were shot forward by the impact, and more or less crushed. All who were unhurt gave a savage cry of rage at the act, and, reckless of a second fall, dashed forward to resume operations upon the door. Ompertz was not slow in urging them on, being now in a wild state of anxiety as to Ludwig's safety. The Count's men seemed capable of anything, and the sooner their power for mischief was at an end the better.

"There is plenty of booty in the robber's den once we get in, my lads," he cried, and they again attacked the great door with a will. Scouts were posted now to give warning of further operations from the roof, but no more danger seemed to threaten from that quarter.

And now the door began to quiver and crack under the incessant, untiring blows, till, from one mighty stroke, it flew open. The leaders, anticipating that the entry would be yet disputed, and that their men would be received with a deadly volley, ordered them, as the door gave way, to fall back on one side or the other.

But nothing of the kind happened. Instead of the desperate body of defenders they had expected to confront, they saw the great hall empty. Then Ompertz

rushed in like an avenging fury, and with a cheer the troops followed.

"Take care! Look out for a surprise! These devils are capable of anything," the other captain cried warningly, but, for anything that could be seen, the devils had lost heart and fled. So easily, in the absence of its leading spirit, was this famed outlaw's stronghold taken.

Through the now deserted rooms and passages Ompertz hurried, careless of the tempting spoil which presented itself on every hand, and by means of which he might easily have mended his fortunes, his mind occupied by but one object, the finding of Ludwig. "Prince!" he shouted, till the silent corridors echoed again, "Prince Ludwig! Where are you?" But no answer came, and as his search went fruitlessly on, the honest soldier began to have a sickening fear that he would never hear that voice again. "Prince!" he cried, in his desperation, "I am here, Ompertz, to set you free. Where are you?"

Shouting as he went, he reached a part of the building where the dimly lighted passages radiated into the rock. The place was indeed the den of a human brute. It struck despair into the soldier's heart.

"A fine limbo for that smooth-spoken villain to live over," he groaned in his desperation. "And I gave him his life that he might finish his butcher's work. Poor Prince Ludwig! With all his mettle, and after all his escapes, to find his death in this beast's den!"

But he was not going to give up the search until he found the prisoner, dead or alive. He tried one wedge-like passage after another, shouting the while like a madman. One of the soldiers, hot for plunder, ran against him.

"What's the noise for, Captain?" he said, clapping him on the shoulder. "You ought to know the bearings of this infernal rookery; now show me where the money-chest is, and we will keep quiet, and share alike."

"To the devil with your money-chest," Ompertz re-

turned impatiently. "I neither know nor care where that murdering dog kept his plunder. I am looking for a man."

"A man?"

"Ay; the finest fellow that ever buckled on sword. Come, help me; though I fear to find his corpse after all."

The other laughed. "Search for a dead man? Not I. Nor for a live woman, either, though the Chancellor is offering a hundred pieces to the man who finds our Princess. There is the scent of wealth in this strong-box, and that's the game for me."

He went off, and Ompertz ran on, calling Ludwig's name. "Fool that I am, to think the dead can hear me," he exclaimed. He passed many doors, trying them all, throwing open those that were unfastened, and kicking at others that were locked, but getting no response. He came to a stone gallery, hewn out of the rock. "Ludwig, my Prince!" he called hoarsely, and the shout was echoed dismally out of the dark depths beyond. Nothing but an echo, as mocking as the voice of the castle's lord. No. Ompertz could not believe that some fiendish voice was not mocking him, as, from the darkness, came an answering cry pronouncing his name. He listened, holding his breath now, not daring to believe he was not cheated. Yes, there! The call came again, muffled but unmistakable, "Ompertz!"

He dashed forward with a fervent cry, then stopped, puzzled. Where had the answering voice come from? He was brought up by the end of the gallery, a solid wall of rock. He called again. Again the reply, this time behind him, but nearer, so close that he could recognize Ludwig's voice. But there was no sign of any door; nothing but a rough surface of rocky wall, and it was from the depth of the rock that the voice seemed to come.

Crying out to get a guiding answer, Ompertz came op-

posite to the spot whence Ludwig's voice so mysteriously proceeded.

"There is a door in the rock," the King called out in answer to his question. "Can you not find it?"

Ompertz searched as well as the obscurity would let him, but could discover no indication of any opening.

"Wait, your Majesty!" he cried at last. "I will fetch those who will set you free."

He hastened back to the inhabited part of the castle, passing on his way soldiers running hither and thither in their eagerness for booty, who took as little heed of him as he of them. In an inner vestibule he came upon a scuffling group. At first he thought it a dispute over some object of value, then something caught his eye which made him turn and rush up to the men.

It appeared that the party which he had posted to guard the rearward approaches to the castle had caught some of the defenders as they took their flight. It was a couple of these ruffians who were surrounded by soldiers threatening them with instant death if they did not disclose where the Count's treasure was kept. Ompertz, recognizing one of the captives as having held a somewhat superior position in the household, pushed his way through, and transferred this fellow from the soldiers' clutches to his own.

"The very man I want. He must show me the way to get at the greatest prize of all, the man, King Ludwig, who is imprisoned yonder in the rock.

The fellow doggedly denied all knowledge of the prisoner.

"Fetch a rope, and throw it over that beam," was Ompertz's practical argument.

The rope was quickly brought and adjusted, and the noose slipped over the now grey face.

"Thirty seconds' silence, my fine fellow, and you swing," Ompertz announced, with military decision.

There was no mistaking his meaning.

"What do you want?" growled the ruffian.

"The opening of my friend's prison."

"If I show you the trick you will let me go free?"

"So far as I am concerned you may go to the devil, who is doubtless expecting you."

"In my own time, Captain?"

"In your own time, or his. Now, hurry; or you will go in mine."

With the rope still round his bull neck, the man was led off in haste to the rock gallery, his conductors intending to play the same game with him on their own account when the Captain should have done with him.

From a receptacle at the entrance of the gallery the man took a small winch. This, when they had arrived at the place where Ludwig's voice had been heard, he fitted into a cunningly concealed hole in the stone. With a few turns, a portion of what seemed the solid rock began to recede; it evidently revolved slowly on a pivot till it left an opening wide enough for a man to pass through. Within was utter darkness, and from this veritable living tomb Ludwig staggered out, having the face of a man who had never thought to see the light of day again.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE COUSINS MEET

HIS great object having been so luckily obtained, having found and reassured Countess Minna, Ompertz judged it well to tell Rollmar the truth about Princess Ruperta, although he did not venture to add that he had known of her flight all along. The Chancellor fell into a fury of annoyance at this new turn of events, which promised to render the hushing-up of her escapade all the more difficult. Ludwig, whose first enquiries had naturally been for Ruperta, was, while overwhelmed at the thought of her devotion, rendered desperately anxious as to the result of the step she had taken.

"It is my own fault," he exclaimed, miserably, "in keeping my secret. Ignorant as to who I am, how could she know the double danger she was running in appealing to the last man she should have sought?"

"Neither does he know her lover's identity," Ompertz suggested, hopefully.

"What does that matter?" Ludwig returned. "Ferdinand is evil-minded and treacherous, and she is the most beautiful woman in the world. Thank Heaven, at least, that I am free."

So, burning with the desire to reach his kingdom, which every hour now must render his the less, and to put his fortunes upon a desperate cast, he addressed himself to

the wrathful and discomfited Rollmar, in whose plans he seemed no longer an appreciable factor.

"I am setting out for Beroldstein within the hour, Excellency."

"For Beroldstein?" The words were snapped out impatiently, indifferently, save for a sneer.

"To regain my kingdom."

"Ah?" He shook his head. "It is too late."

"That is my fault in some measure, fate's in a greater."

"It is a pity fate is against you," Rollmar returned, curtly. "Luck counts for much in politics, as in everything else. Well, I wish yours may return, Prince."

Clearly he did not think it would. He was turning away, busy with more urgent speculations, when Ludwig's next words recalled him.

"As the husband chosen by yourself for Princess Ruperta, I may look to your Excellency for help in asserting my rights?"

Rollmar looked at him sharply. "Help? It is no business of mine or my master's to set you on the throne. And I have already told you that the alliance we sought was with the undisputed heir to the throne of Drax-Beroldstein."

"An excellent reason," Ludwig returned with a confident smile, "why you should render me all the assistance in your power. I do not ask much. Only the few troops you have here, ready to hand, in my very territory. I am going straightway to claim my crown, you know I am neither a coward nor a fool, and luck has of late not been altogether against me. Will you, who profess such interest in me, grudge me the escort of this handful of men with which to enter my kingdom?"

"A forlorn hope, Prince."

"No," he replied resolutely. "Let me put it to you as policy. These men I seek to borrow may make all the difference between success and failure, although, if

I live, I do not mean to fail. Think what the effect will be if I ride into Beroldstein at the head of a body of your troops, the sign that I am backed by the power of Waldavia. And with Princess Ruperta by this time in Ferdinand's clutches you cannot do otherwise than assert your interest in the situation. Do you think she will ever marry Ferdinand? I tell you that, whatever may be my fate, you may put that idea from your mind. Her courage and her constancy I can answer for."

Rollmar had his own views of the female mind, still he was forced to confess to himself that Ludwig's argument had a certain practical point. He felt more than ever furious that he had again let the Princess slip from his grasp to the thwarting of his plans, but, as statesman and diplomatist, he knew he must set himself to make the best of fate's ill turn, and try by a stroke to win his game against it yet. Ludwig's proposal was daring to rashness; and the cunning statesman hated and despised rashness, but it was just feasible and the situation was becoming so desperate that an heroic measure seemed called for. His sharp eyes read Ludwig, as he stood before him, confident and eager, as though the brain behind them were forecasting the desperate venture to its result by the token of its leader's character.

"So!" he said, still dubious, "you think, Prince, that you have only to appear, for the people and the troops to declare for you?"

"I am sure of it. Only let me show that I am recognized as King by you?"

"H'm! It is a desperate chance, touch and go. I would not wager a ducat on it. Yet I like your spirit; I sympathize with your determination; power is no light thing to let another snatch away. No; were I in your place I would do as you are intending, though I would never have given my enemies the chance of making it necessary for the sake of a romantic whim. But then,

if all men's characters were alike where would be the zest in state-craft?"

The Chancellor was becoming more human under the inspiration of fighting for power than ever Ludwig had seen in him or thought possible.

So the upshot was that when the troops could be drawn from the sacking of Irromar's castle, Rollmar, having thrown down his stake, turned homewards, and Ludwig rode off towards the capital of his kingdom with Ompertz at his side, and at the head of some three-score men. The delay in setting forth had been considerable, and the rough way made the progress of so large a company comparatively slow, so that it was nightfall when they arrived within a league of the city, having just missed encountering on their way a horseman, spurring through the forest, with evil in his face and murder in his heart—Karl Irromar.

Here a halt was made, while Ompertz was sent forward to give notice of Ludwig's approach to several trusted friends and adherents. This was carried out quietly, and without arousing suspicion, even among Ferdinand's spies, whose vigilance was, perhaps, beginning to relax. So successful was Ompertz's errand, and so eagerly was the news of Ludwig's arrival received by his friends, who had begun to despair of his coming, that in two hours' time quite a considerable party had ridden out to greet their lawful sovereign. A plan was hastily formed, and it was resolved that the most likely way to gain their object was by a surprise and sudden *coup de main*.

Accordingly, the order was given, and the party rode forward to the city with all haste, lest the affair should get wind, and Ferdinand's party have time to be on their guard. The advance was accomplished so successfully, that not until the gates were reached did the citizens become aware of what was going forward. Then several of Ludwig's adherents dashed forward up the streets,

crying, "Ludwig! Long live King Ludwig, who has come to claim his own! Hurrah for Ludwig, our rightful King! Out, men, and rally round your King, King Ludwig for ever!"

In a very few minutes the almost deserted streets became thronged with excited citizens, running hither and thither; and when Ludwig, at the head of what seemed a formidable body of troops, came clattering resolutely down the street, they recognized and began to shout for him, as they followed with excited curiosity in his wake.

So far all was well, but the most difficult and critical part of the business was yet to be faced. With all speed Ludwig and his followers made straightway for the palace and the barracks, which stood near together. By the time they arrived there it was evident that the bad news had been received; the palace was astir, and men were seen hurrying to and fro. Ludwig and his troops rode up to the main entrance, while Ompertz and half a dozen influential men turned aside to the barracks with a view of gaining over the soldiery by a sudden appeal. The great alarm bell began its frightful clanging; and as the soldiers sprang to arms, the party of Ludwig's adherents presented themselves.

"Soldiers, your King has returned: King Ludwig," cried Anton de Gayl. "He is even now at the palace doors, claiming his throne from the usurper. You are his soldiers, not Ferdinand's; he looks to you to support him in right and truth and justice. Men, will you stand by him? He has the army of the Duke of Waldavia at his back, but he wants you; he relies on your loyalty and devotion. Say, are they his?"

From the windows could be seen the great square before the palace filled with troops and with a surging, shouting crowd, and, in the darkness, the real proportion of soldiers and citizens could not be distinguished. The men were taken by surprise, and evidently undecided.

Suddenly a voice in the hall cried, "Long live King Ludwig!"

The effect was electrical, and, with a great cheer, the cry was echoed. De Gayl drew his sword.

"He is there, your rightful King," he shouted excitedly; "there, on the threshold, claiming his throne. It is you, his own soldiers, his own countrymen, to whom he will look to seat him on it and maintain him there. Let Waldavians stand aside; this is the work and the privilege of Beroldsteiners. Come!"

He rushed out, and the men, with a cheer, caught up their arms and followed him.

In the meantime, Ludwig had advanced to the very door of the palace, which was hastily closed and barred against him. Then, by his orders, a blast was sounded, and a very stentor among his followers demanded admittance for Ludwig, the lawful King. As no reply was forthcoming, the order was given for the door to be forced. While this was in train, it was evident that the inmates of the palace were in a state of panic. And it was no wonder, with the whole square filled by what seemed a threatening crowd, and a strong body of troops at the very doors. Frantic messages were sent to the barracks for military aid; but it was too late, while only a handful of soldiers were within the palace and available. The main body was already outside and shouting for Ludwig.

The door was burst in with a crash, disclosing the brilliantly lighted vestibule filled with a desperate crowd of the usurper's household. They offered no resistance, since it was clearly futile, as Ludwig, surrounded by a strong body-guard, entered, and passed triumphantly through to the state salon which lay beyond.

Here, in the midst of a group composed of his council, and adherents, whose drawn swords and militant attitudes contrasted oddly with their anxious, apprehensive

faces, stood Ferdinand, haggard and desperate, yet with a look of defiant hatred in his eyes.

So the cousins met.

For a few moments there was a pause, as it were at the very crisis in the game of life and death, when the winner's stroke was made, and the losing gambler saw his ruin in his adversary's face. It was a terrible silence, wherein men held their breath, and dared not anticipate the breaking of the intolerable strain.

Ludwig spoke first, standing forward now, and confronting his cousin's lowering face.

"So you have taken care of my throne for me in my absence, Ferdinand," he said, with an almost sweet gravity. "I fear the relinquishing of it will be distasteful to you, yet the moment has come when I must claim my own."

Ferdinand's sharp eyes searched for a suspicion of irony, but the sting, though sharp enough, was hidden. Ludwig's tone and expression were as gravely simple as his words. Even the acuter Morvan, who stood by, biting his sensual lip in utter discomfiture, could detect no sarcasm.

Ferdinand made a brave attempt at a smile, but the result was a grin of hate and mortification. "So you are alive, after all, Cousin Ludwig," he said awkwardly, and with a dry tongue. "We heard, on good authority, that you were dead."

"I fear," Ludwig returned, with stern calmness, "that my cousin was so content with such acceptable news, that he troubled neither to verify it, for fear it might prove false, nor to send me help in my danger. I have, indeed, been near death more than once; but, under Heaven's mercy, have escaped. And I am here, as you see, to claim my throne."

The last words, which were pronounced as a challenge, were received by Ferdinand and his party with ominous silence. The usurper glanced at Morvan, who went near

and spoke to him in a low tone. Then, in the midst of the dark mutterings, there was a movement beyond the doorway, which was filled by Ludwig's adherents, who there awaited the upshot. They now drew aside to make a passage for Ompertz and de Gayl, who entered at the head of a body of the domestic troops which they had led from the barracks. Ferdinand, seeing the uniforms, and thinking they had come to his assistance, raised his head in relief, and stood forth defiantly. But Morvan had noticed the leaders, and shrank back, knowing the game was lost.

"I say I am here to claim my kingdom and the throne you have usurped," Ludwig exclaimed, irritated and impatient at the other's attitude.

There was a great shout of "Long live King Ludwig!" and Ferdinand drew back like a beaten hound.

"Does my cousin Ferdinand acknowledge or dispute my claim?" The question was spoken in a lower tone, but quite clearly.

For some moments no answer came from the baffled man, half crouching like a wolf at bay. Ludwig went up to him. "You must decide on the instant," he said, sternly, "or take the consequences."

Ferdinand ground his teeth together, as his vicious eyes sought counsel from Morvan. But the evil counsellor had none ready to meet that crisis, no time had been allowed to face the situation, he looked from one cousin to the other, silently compared them, and saw his case was hopeless; so the only reply he could give was a shrug. The bold game had been played and lost, and that it was irretrievably lost no one knew better than he whose brain had conceived it.

Ferdinand was fain to answer. "Have I ever pretended to dispute your right, or asserted my own claim, save on your disappearance and reported death? You have to thank me, cousin, for having kept the throne safe

for you ; nor do I imagine that you in my place would have acted otherwise."

The speech was disingenuous enough, and Ludwig knew it ; still he was content to take no further exception to it beyond replying :

" I think I should have acted with less haste and more decency. But that may pass. Then you, and the council, acknowledge my claim as rightful? "

There was a pause, as every man whom he addressed hesitated to declare the defeat of his own ambition. Nevertheless, the reluctant assent could not, in face of those odds, be withheld, and the word was sullenly spoken.

Ludwig acknowledged it a little haughtily, as accepting a right rather than a favour, and, at the word, de Gayl and Ompertz led the soldiers in another cheer, which, caught up and echoed through the hall and out into the palace square, sounded the knell of Ferdinand's ambitious hopes.

" You will not be surprised," said Ludwig, addressing his cousin, " that, until the public mind is clearer, I shall find it necessary to deprive you and your friends of your liberty. You will merely be confined to your own apartments, and I trust only a few days' detention may be necessary."

With a bitter scowl, Ferdinand turned away, a prisoner where, an hour before, he had played king. Thus, straightway, and without bloodshed, did Ludwig gain his throne.

Ruperta, who was lodged in the precincts of the palace, heard the tumult, which lasted almost through the night. Presently she was told that Prince Ludwig had arrived to claim his throne, and that a terrible struggle was anticipated. This news came as a stunning blow in her distress, for she realized that while the King had to fight for his throne he would have no mind or men for her service. Then, in the morning, she heard that the affair

was peaceably concluded, that Ferdinand had abdicated, and that Ludwig was King. So she made haste to renew her petition to the new ruler, and with revived hope, since she had, on reflection, come to distrust Ferdinand, and to doubt any real intention on his part of helping her.

In the miserable hours of waiting, she had divined that she had made upon the King an impression which would fall like a bar between her and her great desire; her instinct told her that he was self-indulgent and treacherous, and that there was little honour in the eyes which had looked on her so ardently. But what of this man, of the new King? she asked herself in her perplexity. That was a speculation which beat her. Politically, she might be considered his betrothed wife; yet he had run away to avoid her, and so nearly lost his kingdom. And now she, of all women, had come to him, of all men, to beg his interest and help on behalf of a lover. The position was intolerably false, for all it was honest and simple enough. She felt hot with shame that she had to make this petition, yet she was desperate, and, even at the best, the life of the man she so loved was hanging in the balance. Yes, she would let no false shame deter her; she would meet King Ludwig boldly and frankly; there was no love between them on either side, and—ah, but there might be. They had never seen each other. What if, at first sight, he should fall in love with her, as Ferdinand had done? Without vanity—poor girl, that was far from her just then—she knew it was more than possible. Her only hope was that King Ludwig might be, as she had pictured him, cold, stern, prejudiced; above all, she prayed that he was chivalrous, then the other qualities would matter little; at least he could not be worse than Ferdinand. So, with anxiety and impatience keeping back her repugnance and pride, she sent to the King, whose first care had been to learn that she was safe, a humble petition for an audience on a matter of life and death. It is certain that she had not to wait long for its granting.

How describe the meeting? When Ruperta entered the presence chamber with fear of failure in her heart, and Ludwig rose to receive her, with greater fear in his, his life, his very soul, seemed to hang on the upshot of that moment of recognition, now so strangely come. At first, as she advanced, she saw only the kingly figure standing to receive her. Perhaps she dreaded to look into his face. But when, as she drew nearer, she did raise her eyes, she could not believe what they told her. She stopped dead, staring in fearful uncertainty at her lover; then, in a flash, the whole thing became plain as though she had known and forgotten and suddenly recollected it. Her pause was a terrible suspense to Ludwig, and, when at last her lips moved, and she cried his name, he ran forward with outstretched arms, and next moment she was clasped to his heart.

"Thank God you are safe," she murmured, and he knew that in her kiss his trick was forgiven.

Then he led her, lover-like to the dais, and with full hearts they talked, not of the past, since they scarcely dared think of it, but of the future, and the delight it surely held for them. And as they talked, a rider, with fury and discomfiture in his face, was savagely spurring a jaded horse over the cobbles of the street that led to the palace, then across the great square, noticing nothing, inquiring nothing, in his hot haste to bring news, bad enough, and the warning which might save his undoing.

"The King!" he cried, as he pulled up his poor reeking horse at the palace steps, flung himself out of the saddle, and rushed up to the door. "I must see the King instantly. I bring news that touches his Majesty's safety."

Those of the attendants who did not guess the truth thought his errand might well be what he proclaimed it, while any who may have realized his mistake kept their own counsel to see what might befall. Roughly, and waving aside any attempt to stay him, the man pressed

forward to the presence-chamber, as the curious groups he passed closed in and followed him.

"The King! I must have instant word with the King."

The door was opened at his approach, and he passed through, while some hurried forward to announce him to the King, who had that moment retired with Ruperta by an opposite door. On receiving the intimation Ludwig spoke a word to his betrothed, and turned back alone. Then, in that hour's second surprise, the two men met again. Count Irromar's hot, flushed face turned pale when he saw who the King was, and realized he had come too late. But his iron nerve did not desert him.

"Already Ludwig?" he exclaimed, with the insolent desperation of a ruined gambler. "I congratulate your Majesty, as much on your promptness as your good luck."

Then he folded his arms, and stood defiantly silent, waiting for his own fate to be pronounced. He had lost all, yet did not for an instant regret his bold game. And, as for escape, a half-glance round had shown him Om-pertz armed and expectant, and a file of soldiers at his elbow.

Ludwig hated his task, and, coming, as it did, so abruptly in the midst of his happiness, it was trebly repugnant. But the remembrance of that fiendishly murdered woman steeled him, more than would ever his own treatment, against an unwise mercy. It would be monstrous, he knew, and a gross abuse of his prerogative to let this ravening human wolf live to devour his subjects.

"You know the penalty of your crimes," he said, with stern dignity, "and can hope for nothing less. It is death."

Irromar bowed his head. "I do not complain. Fate has served you well, Ludwig. I accept the penalty which would have been yours but for the mischance of an hour. As I have lived my life, so will I die my death."

Thus he went out to his prison and the scaffold.

"I shall never forgive you for running all those unnecessary risks for me," Ruperta said to Ludwig. "I am sure if your subjects had known all your fool-hardiness, sir, they would have pronounced you unfit to govern them soberly, and would never have allowed you to depose Ferdinand."

"You would not have cared for me, my glorious love," he replied fondly, "if I had come in sober, formal state to take possession of you, to have the bargain paid over on the counter of the banker, Rollmar."

"Tell me the truth, sir," she insisted, her love hardly kept out of sight by her show of peremptoriness, "you came secretly like that to see whether you approved of the bargain. Had I not pleased you, it would have been so easy for Lieutenant von Bertheim to have slipped away again and left no one the wiser."

"You are wrong, sweetheart. I knew there was no chance of that. For I had been given a description of you, as good a portrait as words could ever hope to paint of one that beggars description——"

"Ludovic!"

"And also a hint that you might rebel against being made a pawn in Rollmar's political game."

"That judgment was not far wrong."

"I heard, too," he continued, "that you were cold and proud; I could easily account for that, and I told myself that, as snow can keep warm a living body hidden beneath it, it did not follow that you had not a warm woman's heart, and that if it were there I might find it."

"You had no little confidence in yourself," she protested, with a little pouting smile.

"You see," he explained, "I expected help in my siege from a traitor in the garrison."

"A traitor?"

"A rebel, who would rather fall into Lieutenant von Bertheim's hands than into Prince Ludwig's."

"Ah! yes."

"And then chance, the most valuable of allies, came to my help."

"Luckily. Chance has played us some fine tricks."

"The best is the last, which has given you to me. Ah, how I dreaded the moment when you would find me out. It might have turned your love to hate."

"A trick that does not offend against love and honour will never make a woman hate a man she really loves. But I ought to bear you a grudge for your easy victory, and to punish you for stripping my heart so bare."

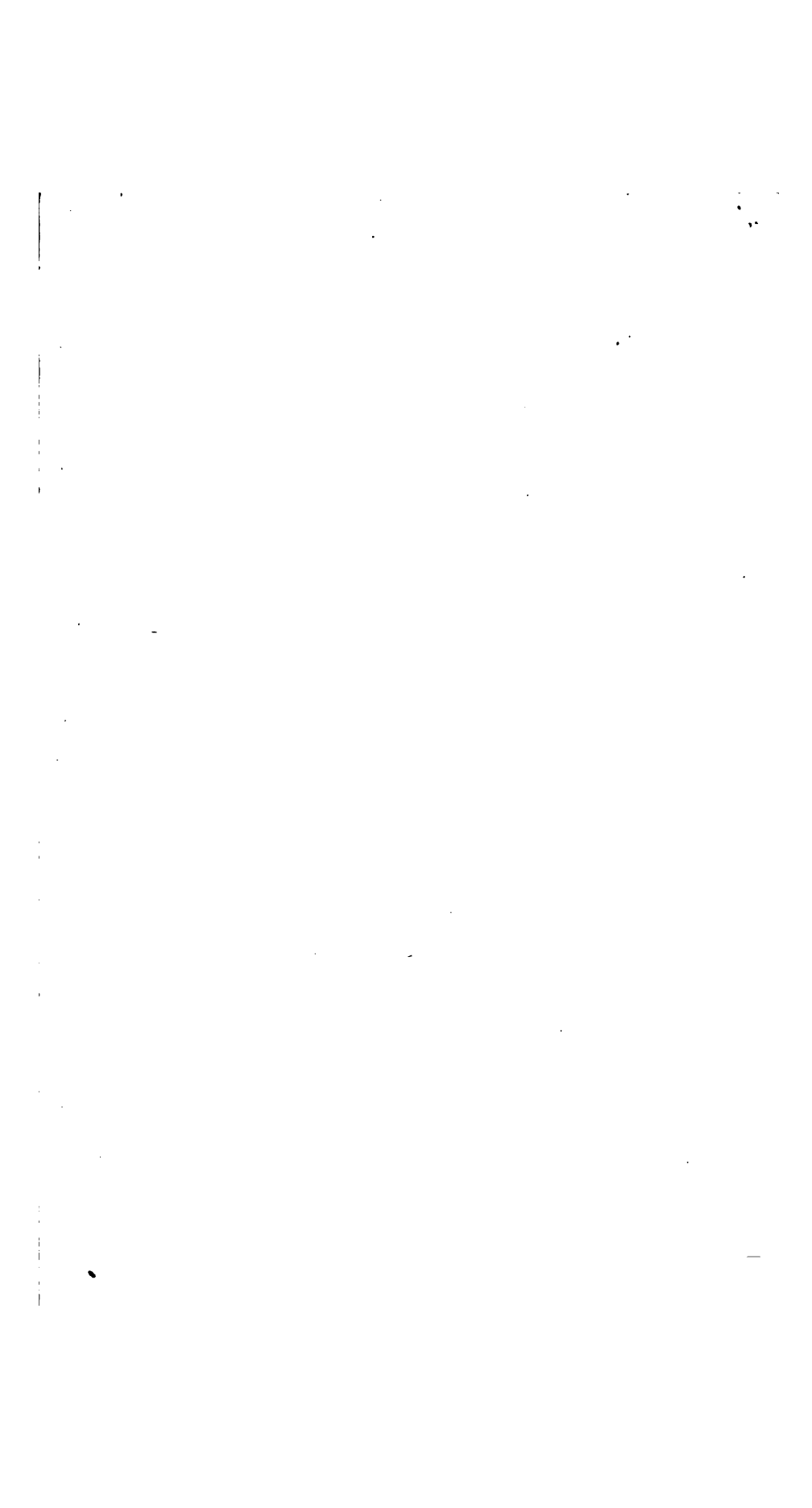
"And for playing into your enemy Rollmar's hands. Punish me; I will submit and kiss the rod."

And with that penance the offence was blotted out.



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JUN 10 1941



